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"Structural Features of Isolation in the Plays of Thomas Bernhard"

by

Nicholas J. Eisner

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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Date 15th October, 1985

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Thomas Bernhard, without whom none of this would have been possible.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the structural features of isolation in Bernhard's plays in the light of his poetological concepts in order to show how these are represented in the plays.

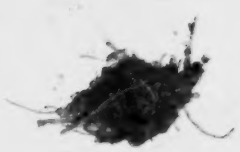
Chapter 1 introduces the main areas of Bernhard's work on which criticism has focussed and disccusses the methodological problems which it has encountered. An approach to his work is then suggested and developed which seems to avoid many of these problems.

Chapter 2 establishes these poetological concepts from the basis of three speeches in which Bernhard lays out the themes and motivations behind his work. It also provides a brief analysis of the concepts in relation to his work as a whole, drawing from his prose as well as his drama.

Chapter 3 analyses the structural features of isolation in the plays, concentrating on the two main areas of the language and the dramatic presentation. The purpose is to show how Bernhard represents his poetological concepts through these particular structural features by examining his stylistic and dramatic technique. Consequently, it becomes apparent how Bernhard creates the sense of isolation and, in its turn, that of nihilism on which criticism often concentrates and which is a major part of his literary concept.

Chapter 4 contrasts this sense of nihilism arising from Bernhard's stylistic technique with the presence of irony.

This irony has the effect of making the reader (or audience) question Bernhard's artistic seriousness. This chapter discusses the implications of such a condition and then draws conclusions from this in respect of Bernhard's reasons for writing drama.



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1. Introduction

1.1 Status of Thomas Bernhard Criticism

The following thesis deals with the structural features of isolation in the plays of Thomas Bernhard in the light of his poetological concepts in order to see how these are represented in practice. Yet before dealing with the problem posed by this phenomenon, which is present in his work as a whole, but which is particularly prominent in his plays, I should like to discuss briefly the status of Thomas Bernhard criticism in general in order to establish the basis for this study. I shall then develop the problem of isolation in his plays with regard to the approach taken in this thesis.

Thomas Bernhard, who was born in 1931 in Heerlen, Holland, of Austrian parents, is by no means a conventional writer, as a reading of any one of his works will testify. Even though his first literary work was published in 1957 (a volume of poetry entitled *Auf der Erde und in der Hölle*) and after further publications he was recognised in reviews and short articles, critical interest in his work was somewhat limited until 1970. ' But since then, as Renate Fuess

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' See the following bibliographies: Gerhard P. Knapp, "Bibliographie," in *Über Thomas Bernhard*, ed. Anneliese Botond (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970) - indicated as *ÜTB* hereafter - pp.144-149; Thomas B. Schumann, "Bibliographie zu Thomas Bernhard," in *Text und Kritik 43*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold (Munich, 1974), pp.50-55; and Kathleen Thorpe, "Bibliographie," in Manfred Jurgensen, *Der Kegel im Wald oder die Geometrie der Verneinung* (Bern/Frankfurt/Las Vegas: Verlag Peter Lang, 1981), pp.161-166. See also: Jens Dittmar, *Thomas Bernhard Werkgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981), pp.232-312.

mentions, an increasing number of critical works has been published including essays, books, articles and encyclopedic entries which reflect varying degrees of enthusiasm, polemics and confusion. [2] Regarding early criticism Fuess notes that it was marked by a lack of perspective, an inability to do more than make vague observations and overly general interpretative statements. [3] These frequently made observations of a failure to come to terms with Bernhard's early works are considered by Fuess partly as the result of an interest arising from sheer fascination rather than from a desire to analyse the texts critically and objectively. [4] Once the initial fascination had waned, however, critics began to take a much harder, more analytical look at Bernhard, some of them even going to extremes. One of the most outspoken in this respect was Marcel Reich-Ranicki who went so far as to class Bernhard as an "österreichischen Heimatdichter" and complained of the monotony dominating

---

[2] See Renate Fuess, *Nicht Fragen. Zum Double-bind in Interaktionsformen und Werkstruktur bei Thomas Bernhard* (Frankfurt: Verlag Peter Lang, 1983), p.9.

[3] See Fuess, p.10. As examples of these failings Fuess quotes Carl Zuckmayer who was only able to come to the superficial conclusion that Bernhard was possessed of a particular type of mind which he phrased thus: "ein geheimer und geheimnisvoller, doch durchaus einleuchtender Sinn." "Ein Sinnbild der grossen Kälte," in *ÜTB*, pp.81-88, p.83; and Anneliese Botond: "Bei Bernhard führt vielleicht tatsächlich das Detail auf dem kürzesten Weg ins Zentrum." "Schlussbemerkung," in *ÜTB*, pp.139-141, p.141.

[4] A good example of this fascination with Bernhard's works is given by Peter Handke who, when describing his first reading of *Verstörung*, is unable to do more than say that he was overwhelmed by the text and had to keep on reading: "Ich war dann aufgestanden und hatte in einer Gaststätte, zur Musik eines Stehgeigers, weitergelesen ... Ich las und las ...." "Als ich *Verstörung* von Thomas Bernhard las," in *ÜTB*, pp.100-106, p.106.

Bernhard's works. [5] Jens Tismar, too, pointed out this characteristic and felt it lessened the works' critical intent towards society. Thus he states:

> Der alles gleichmachende, rigorose Bannfluch über die Zustände dieser Welt, den der Autor durch seine Figuren beharrlich repetieren lässt, entwertet die Substanz seiner Kritik. [6]

Despite these vocal condemnations, matched by equally vocal praise of Bernhard's work,[7] much of the criticism remained superficial, lacking in perspective. [8] Interest, however, remained high. While early articles and reviews were diverse in their assessment of Bernhard, [9] they were followed by more extensive studies which, because they were able to draw on a larger body of both primary and secondary material, contained far more detailed criticism and therefore led to a greater consensus towards his works. However, this trend towards critical agreement also arises from what Hajo Steinert interprets as a failure to penetrate very deeply into the texts. [10] The main critical works of this period

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[5] Marcel Reich-Ranicki, "Konfessionen eines Besessenen," in *ÜTB*, pp.93-99, p.94.

[6] Jens Tismar, "Thomas Bernhards Erzählerfiguren," in *ÜTB*, pp.68-77, p.76.

[7] See for example George Steiner who calls Bernhard "the most original and concentrated novelist writing in German." "Conic Sections," in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 13.2.1976. See also Fuess who refers to a summary of the critical debate surrounding Bernhard by Josef Donnenberg: "Zeitkritik bei Thomas Bernhard," in *Zeit- und Gesellschaftskritik in der österreichischen Literatur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Vienna: Institut für Österreichkunde, 1973), pp.115-143. See Fuess, p.9.

[8] See Fuess, p.9.

[9] Despite this diversity Botond was able to claim that there was nevertheless some consensus about the fact that Bernhard could write, "sei er nun modern oder nicht." Botond, p.139.

[10] See Hajo Steinert, *Das Schreiben über den Tod. Von Thomas Bernhards "Verstörung" zur Erzählprosa der siebziger Jahre*

such as those by Herbert Gamper and Bernhard Sorg, both entitled *Thomas Bernhard*, [11] attempt to discuss Bernhard's total output and describe its most important (and obvious) features rather than concentrate on specific problems. On the other hand, those works which do not attempt a total analysis, but do try to concentrate on specific problems are also not without their faults and fall into three main groups: [12] those failing to balance text and method in which a cursory analysis is extended to a wider (usually) social context; [13] those with much description but little analysis; [14] and those which "analyse" Bernhard's works to illustrate and justify a preconceived idea. [15]

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[10](cont'd) (Frankfurt/Bern/New York: Verlag Peter Lang, 1984), p.27.

[11] Herbert Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977). Bernhard Sorg, *Thomas Bernhard* (Munich: Verlag C.H.Beck, 1977). Gamper concentrates mainly on the dramas, while Sorg concentrates mainly on the prose-works.

[12] See Fuess, p.10.

[13] See for example Hans Höller, *Kritik einer literarischen Form. Versuch über Thomas Bernhard* (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag, 1979) and also Kurt Batt, "Die Exekution des Erzählers. Westdeutsche Romane zwischen 1968 und 1972," in *Revolte intern. Betrachtungen zur Literatur in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1975). Both analyse Bernhard in terms of Marxist criticism. See Fuess, p.10, footnote 1.

[14] E.g. Manfred Jurgensen, *Der Kegel im Wald*. Jurgensen discusses Bernhard's work in terms of four general categories which he calls: "Individuum und Gesellschaft," "Natur und Wissenschaft," "Thema und Variation" and "Sprache und Form." These categories cover the main areas of Bernhard criticism, but Fuess feels Jurgensen fails to do more than compile facts. See Fuess, p.10, footnote 2.

[15] E.g. Ria Endres, *Am Ende angekommen. Dargestellt am wahnhaften Dunkel der Männerporträts des Thomas Bernhard* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 1980). Fuess calls this work a "modisch aufgemachten feministischen Essay." See Fuess, p.10, footnote 3.

Keeping this situation in mind I should now like to discuss why critics seem to have failed to come to terms with Bernhard's work. The problem appears to be one of the approach taken. In this respect Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler claims that this state of affairs has arisen because Bernhard is difficult to compare with other authors. '[6] He says that when a comparison is attempted the result is more of an observation of similarity, a nearness to Beckett or Kafka, than a genuine comparison, and that this lack of comparison makes critics unsure of themselves when dealing with Bernhard because they have no point of reference from which to approach him and are therefore unable to agree on how to assess his work. '[7] Referring to this fact, Hans Wolfschütz, however, observes that Bernhard's texts seem especially designed to cause this kind of confusion in terms of a point of reference, possibly even to have this as their intent. Thus Wolfschütz comments:

> Bernhard's literary explorations defy all categorization; he hints at solutions while at the same time throwing a veil of mystery around their implications - "Die Antwort muss ausbleiben" (*Der Keller*, p.157.) His style, his linguistic abstractions and the circular structure of his works leads to a broad spectrum of interpretations. '[8]

Consequently, if it is Bernhard's intention, as one would

'[6] See Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, "Thomas Bernhard," in *Deutsche Literatur der Gegenwart in Einzeldarstellungen. Bd.2* ed. Dietrich Weber (Stuttgart: Alfred Kroner Verlag, 1977), pp.56-76, p.72.

'[7] ibid.

'[8] See Hans Wolfschütz, "Thomas Bernhard: The Mask of Death," in *Modern Austrian Writing. Literature and Society after 1945* ed. Alan Best and Hans Wolfschütz (London: Oswald Wolff, 1980), pp.214-235, p.227.

conclude from Wolfschütz' observation, to "hint at solutions while at the same time throwing a veil of mystery around their implications" then the critic needs to use a method (or methods) which will penetrate this "veil of mystery" and help reveal the purpose behind this obscurity. In this respect Marianne Kesting notes the reluctance of critics to approach Bernhard on terms which would be more suitable considering the nature of his work. [19] She says that Bernhard's prose is considered questionable or even dangerous because critics have not approached the material on its own terms, preferring to stay on what is for them familiar ground. However, she feels that this is a problem encountered by modern literature in general, stating that the question of normality is its root cause:

> Es erhebt sich die grundsätzliche Frage, ob man an moderne Literatur ... die Kriterien des Normalen anzulegen überhaupt noch berechtigt ist. Ihre Situation ist so wenig normal, dass sie nicht normal genannt werden könnte, wollte sie normal oder gar gesund reagieren. Das gelingt allenfalls Kritikern, die weniger die moderne Literatur als ihre eigene, vielleicht sehr normale Person im Blickpunkt haben. [20]

Therefore, when dealing with modern literature the critic should approach it on the basis of its poetological intents, whatever they may be, and it ought not to be seen through his personal optics. Returning to Bernhard, Kesting says that one has to get behind the image of the "abnormal" world

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[19] See Marianne Kesting, "Die Welt des Thomas Bernhard - unsere Welt? Zu seinem Roman *Das Kalkwerk*, in *Auf der Suche nach der Realität. Kritische Schriften zur modernen Literatur* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1972), pp.163-168, pp.163-164.

[20] ibid.

portrayed and find out why it is that way. Thus Kesting:

> So wird man sich, wenn man einen Schriftsteller wie Thomas Bernhard ernst zu nehmen gewillt ist ..., die Frage stellen müssen, warum die Welt seiner Personen die des Wahns und der Besessenheit ist und was sich an ihnen abzeichnet. [21]

Therefore, I must conclude that, not until Bernhard's work is approached on its own terms, rather than on those with which the critic feels safe, is it possible to begin to analyse it properly, to do more than make superficial observations, as noted by Fuess.[22] In this respect Anneliese Botond points out that literary criticism was slow in adopting methods derived from such areas as sociology, psychology and linguistics to deal with Bernhard at a time when they were readily at hand and already quite common tools in the analysis of modern literature in general. Thus Botond:

> Relativ spät angesichts der Tatsache, dass seit langem Soziologie, Psychologie, Psychoanalyse, Linguistik Methoden und Perspektiven der Literaturkritik erweitert haben, wurde die Frage gestellt, ob diesen Büchern mit rein literarischen Masstäben beizukommen sei. [23]

The application of these and other methods would seem to be the way to penetrate the "veil of mystery" and be of help in answering why things are the way they are in Bernhard's texts. Fuess, however, feels that even this approach has failed. [24] She sees the problem here, as quoted below, as one of an imbalance between text and method in which the

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[21] ibid. p.164
[22] See footnote 4.
[23] Anneliese Botond, "Schlussbemerkung," in *ÜTB*, p.140.
[24] See Fuess, p.12.

non-literary approach is paramount and the essential literary nature of the work is either relegated or ignored. Or, in Fuess' words:

> Die Unzulänglichkeit bisheriger Ansätze, Bereiche ausserhalb der Literaturwissenschaft für die Deutung Bernhardscher Texte fruchtbar zu machen, ergab sich aus den Fehlerquellen der gewählten - stark verengten - Perspektiven, die vor allem Fragen der ästhetischen Form ... ausblendeten. [25]

Therefore we have a series of studies which either do not make use of all the tools available, or make use of some of these tools but in so doing lose sight of the literary text under examination.

1.2 The Problem of Isolation in Thomas Bernhard's Plays and Thesis Approach

Until recently criticism thought of Bernhard almost exclusively in terms of a prose writer and commented on the plays only in reference to his prose. [26] Therefore it is necessary to discuss his status as a dramatist before moving on to the problem of isolation in his plays. This apparent neglect of Bernhard's plays (i.e. that they are not dealt with in their own rights most of the time) is all the more surprising when one considers the number of plays Bernhard has written and the success these have had in the German-speaking world.

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[25] ibid. See also footnote 13.
[26] See, for example, Hans Höller who examines *Ein Fest für Boris* to support the conclusions reached elsewhere in his study of Bernhard's prose.

In 1983 Bernhard's publisher, Suhrkamp, released a complete collection of 12 dramas written between 1970 and 1981; [27] since then three more plays have been published. [28] This is, indeed, a considerable output, especially as Bernhard has also continued with his prolific production of prose during this time. [29] Regarding the success of these plays Alfred Barthofer says that Bernhard is "not only one of the most prolific and versatile but also one of the most successful writers in the field of German drama," a claim which he supports by listing the leading German, Austrian and Swiss theaters in which Bernhard's plays have been performed. [30]

However, despite this success and the volume of dramatic material available, Bernhard criticism has largely ignored this area. Gamper's study is one of the few to concentrate on Bernhard's plays, but it mainly deals with the themes of the plays (five at that time) and does not take the dramatic structures into account. He does, however, include a section summarising reviews of some performances

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[27] Thomas Bernhard, *Die Stücke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983).
[28] Thomas Bernhard, *Der Schein trügt* (1983); *Ritter, Dene, Voss* (1984); *Der Theatermacher* (1984), all Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
[29] See Dittmar, "Vita," in *Werkgeschichte*, pp.313-315.
[30] Alfred Barthofer, "The Plays of Thomas Bernhard - A Report," in *Modern Austrian Literature*, Vol.11, No.1 (1978), pp.21-48, p.21. Barthofer lists the following cities whose major theatres have produced his plays: Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, Frankfurt, Essen, Zürich, Basel, Vienna and Salzburg (as part of the Festivals). See also Dittmar, *Werkgeschichte* and Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, pp.179-214.

of these plays, but even these tend to focus on the content. [31] Other studies of the dramas tend to be limited to articles which again focus mainly on the content, such as Barthofer's contributions "Das Cello und die Peitsche. Beobachtungen zu Thomas Bernhard's *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*," [32] and "The Plays of Thomas Bernhard - A Report." [33] Thus Bernhard criticism has tended to concentrate on the themes of his works and has therefore often ignored the structures used to carry these themes.

In order to get closer to the problem to be discussed in this thesis, the question then arises, under which perspective the dramatic works of Thomas Bernhard should be viewed in order to develop a concept which can be used as a tool in order to achieve an understanding of the plays in their own right and not as mere extensions of the theme complex of the prose, as has been done several times, [34] or as models for the preconceived ideas of critics, which actually represent two of the main shortcomings of the critical approach towards modern German literature.

In order to develop this perspective I would first like to discuss briefly some of the major features of Bernhard's plays, features which are actually rather limited and occur again and again. In this respect Höller notes in the

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[31] See Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, pp.179-214.
[32] In *Sprachkunst*, 7 (1976), pp.294-311.
[33] See footnote 29 above.
[34] See, for example, Höller's chapter on *Ein Fest für Boris* in *Kritik einer literarischen Form*, pp.13-59, and Manfred Jurgensen, *Der Kegel im Wald*.

introduction to his study of Bernhard that the results of his dissertation in 1973, which formed the basis of his publication, were still valid for those works produced by Bernhard in the intervening six years. [35] Höller approaches Bernhard from the perspective of Marxist criticism in order to show that, even though the style of Bernhard's portrayal of the world is unique, both the content and the structure of his works convey perfectly the topic of man's alienation from his surroundings, one of the most common themes in modern literature. The reason for the continued validity of these results lies, he feels, in the fact that Bernhard's writing is governed by a strong and consistent thematic unity which does not allow much room for any changes in the content or structure of his works. [36] This style of writing would seem to allow us to make observations on some of Bernhard's plays which can then be applied to all the others. Thus Gamper is able to observe certain recurring structural features regarding the major dramatic components:

> Die Handlung wird nicht vorgespielt ..., sondern erzählt. Es gibt keinen Dialog in dem Sinn, dass Personen zueinander sprechen würden; Kunstfiguren, Gleichnisfiguren ... reden mehr oder weniger ins Leere hinaus .... Sie sind verkörperte Funktionen; was sie sind und was sie sagen, ist unmittelbar der Idee des Ganzen untergeordnet. [37]

In other words the traditional interaction of the "dramatis personae" seems to be disturbed to a great extent for reasons which will not only be discussed later, but which

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[35] See Höller, *Kritik einer literarischen Form*, p.7.
[36] ibid.
[37] Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, pp.81-82.

will lead to the main core of my investigation. Later Gamper redefines his observations in a comparison of Bernhard's particular style of drama with drama in general in which he states that Bernhard avoids as much as possible those dramatic features which are the essence of drama itself. Therefore dramatic suspense is reduced by the near elimination of plot, "characters" are mere mouthpieces of ideas given to them, and dialogue is replaced by what Gamper calls "sperrige Monologe" - unwieldy monologues which dominate the work. [38]

This feature of the so-called "sperrige Monologe" has been looked at in relation to Bernhard's prose, notably by Erich Jooss in his study *Aspekte der Beziehungslosigkeit. Drei Studien zum Monolog des Fürsten in Thomas Bernhards Roman "Verstörung."* [39] As the title of Jooss' study indicates indirectly, Bernhard's works are characterised by a breakdown in communication, an inability of individuals to relate to each other. Therefore, and this is very important for an understanding of his plays, the characters of his works seem to live in a world in which they are more or less completely isolated from each other. This situation of individual isolation, then, must result in a series of monologues in which these characters speak "mehr oder weniger ins Leere hinaus, aneinander vorbei," or, when there are several characters involved, the monologues pass by each

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[38] See Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.152.
[39] Munich: Notos, 1976. See also Manfred Jurgensen's essay, "Die Sprachpartituren des Thomas Bernhard," in *Annäherungen* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1981), pp.99-122.

other, like automatic responses, without the characters actually becoming involved in the others' statements. [40] The general critical consensus is that, however hard they try, Bernhard's figures are unable to break down the walls of their isolation by means of language. Since the dramatic consequence of this total isolation would be silence, which in turn would destroy the play as such, the characters are forced to continue to speak, which seems to be an effort to escape from their "aussichtsloses Eingesperrtsein in eine geschlossene Welt," [41] but which only serves to intensify and exacerbate their isolation. Therefore, it would seem that the term "isolation," when used to examine the structural features of Bernhard's plays, would be suitable as the concept through which we can achieve an understanding of the plays in their own right, which is the aim of this thesis.

In proceeding towards this goal I shall begin with a brief analysis of Bernhard's poetics as established in his theoretical statements and in his works, in order to form a basis for the following examination of his dramas under the perspective of the concept of isolation. This examination will necessarily concentrate on a selection of the plays, but conclusions will be extended to all the plays where possible and differences noted if they are significant enough to indicate a change of direction in Bernhard's dramatic concept.

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[40] See Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.82.
[41] Höller, *Kritik einer literarischen Form*, p.35.

2. Bernhard's Poetological Concepts

A reading of any one of Bernhard's texts published since 1963 will present the reader with what A.P. Dierick calls "gloomy descriptions of the human condition," a world which appears to be dominated by death and which some critics, such as Gudrun Temple and Johannes Kleinstück, have, not surprisingly, called nihilistic and self-destructive. [42] Gerhard Knapp and Frank Tasche have commented on the startling effect Bernhard has had on the public and critics alike, noting that the reactions to his texts seem to be characterised by the same thematic features which govern his work. Thus Knapp and Tasche:

> Nicht nur in den Texten Thomas Bernhards geht es immer wieder um **Verstörung, Irritation, Verwirrung** ..., auch die Rezeption dieser Texte durch Leserschaft und Literaturkritik ist gleichermassen von diesen Begriffen geprägt. [43]

At first these reactions may seem somewhat exaggerated when one considers that Bernhard's themes are not unique, but are very much a part of 20th Century literature and so should no longer cause such outcry. In this respect Hajo Steinert observes that Bernhard has adopted themes which are both common to Modernism and prevalent in the works of such respected writers as Rilke, Kafka and Beckett:

> Ganz in der Tradition der Moderne seit ca. 1900 stehend, griff Bernhard Themen auf, die schon bei

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[42] See: A.P. Dierick, "Thomas Bernhard's Austria: Neurosis, Symbol or Expedient?" in *Modern Austrian Literature*, Vol.12, 12 (1979), pp.73-94, p.73; Gudrun Temple, *The Times*, 4/2/1971; and Johannes Kleinstück, *Die Welt*, 29/10/1970.
[43] Gerhard Knapp and Frank Tasche, "Die permanente Dissimulation," in *Literatur und Kritik*, Vol.10, 58 (1971), pp.483-496, p.483.

> Rilke, Kafka oder Beckett vorherrschend waren: Desorientierung in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft, Vereinsamung in einer Welt der "transzendentalen Obdachlosigkeit" (Lukács) sind Umschreibungen, die auch für die Prosawelt des Thomas Bernhard zutreffen. ‘‘

Therefore it does not seem to be the actual themes of Bernhard's works which cause such strong responses as they are common features of modern literature and have long been recognised by the reading public. However, as Steinert continues his description of Bernhard's works he points out the essential difference between Bernhard and the above mentioned authors. This difference lies in the overwhelming intensity with which the theme of death dominates all aspects of life, in effect becoming the meaning of life, in Bernhard's texts. In the words of Steinert:

> Die literarischen Figuren erfahren das Leben als Totalität des Leids, als bewusste Antizipation des Todes. Der Tod ist für sie nicht bloss biologisches Faktum, Schicksal, bzw. gottgewollte Fügung, sondern das wesentliche **Sinnzentrum**, an dem andere Probleme, Ereignisse des Lebens gemessen werden. ‘‘

Because of this great concentration on the theme of death it is possible that the casual reader of one of Bernhard's works will come to the conclusion that the author is morbid and nihilistic, as shown by the reactions of Temple and Kleinstück mentioned above. However, this conclusion represents the common mistake of identifying the author with the content of his texts, of not approaching the works on their own terms. As Marianne Kesting points out - and as

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‘‘ Hajo Steinert, *Das Schreiben über den Tod. Von Thomas Bernhards "Verstörung" zur Erzählprosa der siebziger Jahre* (Frankfurt/Bern/New York: Verlag Peter Lang, 1984), p.19.
‘‘ ibid. (Emphasis Steinert).

discussed earlier - this is a mistake often made with modern literature and one which should be avoided because modern literature does not necessarily operate within the realm of what the reader/critic may term as "normal." [11] With this in mind she says of Bernhard, as already mentioned, that it is not enough to observe what the world he depicts is like, one should also ask why it is that way. [12] In order to do this it is important to understand why Bernhard writes and what he hopes to achieve, in other words one should be aware of his poetological intentions.

When one turns to Bernhard's interviews and speeches to look at his theoretical statements, which also appear as poetological reflections in his published fiction and autobiographical works - a frequent trait in modern German prose - one expects some answers to the questions which are posed by the motives and intentions of his fiction. Unfortunately this is not the case with Bernhard. As Steinert points out, instead of answers being given, more questions need to be asked to help solve the new problems which arise from these. [13] The reason for this is that Bernhard addresses the theme of death in everything he says and writes, and that the same style of presentation characterises all his statements, fictional or otherwise. Therefore we can deduce that rather than explain his works - an act which most contemporary writers abhor - he prefers to portray their meaning in its

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[11] See Kesting, "Die Welt des Thomas Bernhard," pp.163-164.
[12] ibid. p.164.
[13] See Steinert, p.21.

formal representation in everything he does. In this respect Gerald Fetz feels that Bernhard's intention is to confront people in all possible ways with the theme of death, continually emphasising its inescapable presence. According to Fetz Bernhard realises that most people's first impulse is either to suppress the dark side of life or to improve or disguise its appearance so that direct contact with the phenomenon of death is avoided at all costs. Bernhard, however, makes use of all opportunities to tear away the masks and disguises given to death so that his public is forced to ponder the inevitable. ''

This, in fact, is what happened when Bernhard gave his acceptance speech on the receipt of the Austrian State Prize for Literature for 1967. This short speech began with a totally unexpected statement of his view of the world and continued in a suitably critical vein towards social conditions, including an accusation of prevailing apathy in Austria. Thus Bernhard in his opening sentence:

> Es ist nichts zu loben, nichts zu verdammen, nichts anzuklagen, aber es ist vieles lächerlich; es ist alles lächerlich, wenn man an den Tod denkt. ''

This and other statements were seen as a slap in the face of the selection committee because, instead of dutifully thanking them for this award - as was expected - he confronted

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'' See Gerald A. Fetz, "Thomas Bernhard und die österreichische Tradition," in *Österreichische Gegenwart. Die moderne Literatur und ihr Verhältnis zur Tradition* ed. Wolfgang Paulsen (Bern/Munich: Francke Verlag,1980), pp.189-205, p.193.

'' Thomas Bernhard, "Dankrede," recorded in *Neues Forum*, 15 (1968), p.349.

them with his harsh opinion that everything, understood by the audience to mean the award in particular, is irrelevant in relation to death. The ensuing furore, which included the Minister of Education walking out of the hall in angry protest, [51] seems to confirm Fetz' claim that Bernhard forces people to reflect upon death against their wishes. However, these statements were more than just an attempt by Bernhard to shock his audience as the theme of the inescapability and omnipresence of death forms the core of his poetological concept, a fact which had obviously escaped the audience at the presentation of the Austrian State Prize.

The opening phrase, quoted above, establishes the perspective from which the rest of the speech is to be understood. From the vantage point of death [52] he is suitably poised to continue what appears to be a harsh attack on everything which is normally considered important in, and symbolic of, a sophisticated culture, such as the modern State and national pride (felt to be particularly relevant to Austria). Of course, under the perspective of death, as Bernhard sees it, these prove to be exactly the opposite - they become irrelevant and are actually evidence of the futility and limitations of life. Thus Bernhard:

> Man begreift: ein ahnungsloses Volk, ein schönes Land - es sind tote oder gewissenhaft gewissenlose Väter, Menschen mit der Einfachkeit und der

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[51] For details of the contoversy surrounding this prize-giving ceremony see Dittmar, *Werkgeschichte*, pp.98-101.

[52] Wolfschütz, p.220.

> Niedertracht, mit der Armut ihrer Bedürfnisse .... Der Staat ist ein Gebilde, das fortwährend zum Scheitern, das Volk ein solches, das ununterbrochen zur Infamie und zur Geistesschwäche verurteilt ist .... Wir sind Österreicher, wir sind apathisch; wir sind das Leben als das gemeine Desinteresse am Leben, wir sind in dem Prozess der Natur der Grössenwahn-Sinn als Zukunft.

Furthermore, we are deceived into believing in the triumph of our supposedly advanced culture whilst actually suffering because of it. Consequently this suffering is all we have to offer, everything in society having been subsumed by the false ideas of modern thought:

> Wir haben nichts zu berichten, als dass wir erbärmlich sind, durch Einbildungskraft einer philosophisch-ökonomisch-mechanischen Monotonie verfallen.

In this case man is no longer an intelligent being in control of his own existence, but is actually a reflection - in a microcosmic form - and a part of the total decay around him, a mere symbol of the pain of his own existence. However, he is generally unable to comprehend this, despite all the evidence, including his own suffering. Man, therefore, has become nothing more than a means to his own destruction:

> Mittel zum Zwecke des Niedergangs, Geschöpfe der Agonie; erklärt sich uns alles, verstehen wir nichts.

In spite of his inability to understand his situation, man is, however, vaguely aware of its cause - death - and is consequently afraid because this is the one thing which he does not wish to encounter or contemplate. Therefore this fear paralyzes his mind so that he is now unable to analyse and escape from his situation and thus remains in a state of

chaos and suffering. Because man refuses to acknowledge the presence of death and is careful not to think about it - we are to assume, it seems, that direct confrontation will help relieve the problem - Bernhard concludes that this suffering is as much as he deserves:

> wir sehen schon, wenn auch undeutlich, im Hintergrund: die Riesen der Angst.
> Was wir denken, ist **nachgedacht**, was wir empfinden, ist chaotisch, was wir sind, ist unklar.
> Wir brauchen uns nicht zu schämen, aber wir **sind** auch chaotisch und wir verdienen nichts als das Chaos.

As can be seen from these excerpts the style of Bernhard's formulation of this part of the basis of his poetological concept - for this is not the whole of it, just the core - is quite terse, but not so terse as to obscure the meaning when one remembers his opening statement. This terseness, which is derived from the elliptical structuring of the phrases, creates an impression of bluntness and (unwelcome) penetrating insight which must have contributed to the astonishing reaction of the audience. These elliptical sentences also mean that apart from the opening phrase no explanation is given for what follows and it must be remembered that everything in the speech refers back to this, and is a direct and logical consequence of this statement. Therefore, despite the appearance to the contrary, there is a governing theme which flows through the speech, linking all the statements and, in fact, explaining them. Added to this obscurity is Bernhard's use of the specific (in this case Austria), mainly for convenience

sake, as a concrete example of his concept. It was the use of Austria as a base for Bernhard's brand of nihilism which appears to have angered the Minister of Education so much. His reaction merely shows that, firstly, he had not understood the concept of the speech and, secondly, that he did not appreciate that the particular was used by Bernhard to give greater vividness to his idea and was used for this reason in opposition to the less forceful - and therefore "safer" - general approach. This is, of course, in accordance with Fetz' view, an example of Bernhard confronting his audience with death against its wishes - worse still, referring them to its presence and effects on their own doorstep.

Perhaps because of the furore which ensued and which can only be ascribed to a failure to penetrate the style of the speech - and possibly to a failure to read (and understand) Bernhard's work for which he was being awarded [53] - he seems to have taken pains to be considerably more explicit and detailed in his next speech, which was for the Anton Wildgans Prize in 1968. This second speech was to have been given little more than two weeks after the one for the Austrian State Prize, but the ceremony was cancelled without explanation. [54] Although he is more detailed - this speech is considerably longer than the first one - Bernhard does little more than reiterate the themes established in the

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[53] See the excerpt from Jürgen P. Wallmann in Dittmar, *Werkgeschichte*, p.100.
[54] See Dittmar, *Werkgeschichte*, p.98.

first speech. Once again the opening phrase is a central aspect of his poetological concept and is an expansion of the basic theory established there. He now explains that not only is death the perspective from which life is to be viewed, it is also the only truth in life and is therefore to be seen as the force behind it:

> Wenn wir der Wahrheit auf der Spur sind, ohne zu wissen, was diese Wahrheit ist ..., so ist es das Scheitern, es ist der Tod, dem wir auf der Spur sind. [55]

In order to emphasise this point Bernhard stresses the presence of death by continually repeating two basic phrases, with minor variations each time, to the effect that everything we say and do, even if we believe it has to do with life, actually has to do with death. Therefore we encounter such phrases as:

> ich spreche, worüber ich auch spreche, selbst wenn ich über das Leben spreche, über den Tod ... (p.347)

And:

> **ich deute das Leben an und spreche vom Tod** (p.348, Bernhard's emphasis)

These phrases often frame a list of topics Bernhard says he could talk about, but which, of course, would be nothing more than the topic of death in disguise.

In order to make clear the universality of his concept Bernhard either addresses the audience directly or uses the plural pronoun "wir" to make sure that it is understood that it applies to everyone - not just Austrians as appeared to

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[55] Thomas Bernhard, "Der Wahrheit und dem Tod auf der Spur," in *Neues Forum* 15 (1968), pp.347-349, p.347.

be the case in his first speech. Therefore we have constructions such as these which leave no doubt as to the general applicability of the concept:

> Wenn wir ein Ziel haben, so scheint es mir, ist es der Tod, wovon wir sprechen, es ist der Tod .... Der Tod ist mein Thema, wie auch Ihr Thema der Tod ist. (p.347)

In closing Bernhard almost casually throws in the idea of madness which, as we shall see later, is strongly associated with the futility of human existence, but which is not expanded upon here. Instead, he thanks his audience for the award which he feels is a mistake - either because they have not understood him as previously, or because the recognition of achievement is pointless as it is irrelevant in his world - and ends with a final reminder of his central theme:

> ich danke Ihnen, obwohl ich ja noch gar nicht weiss, für was ich Ihnen jetzt danke, möglicherweise danke ich Ihnen tatsächlich für eine Verrücktheit ... ich sage noch einmal: ich danke Ihnen für diese Auszeichnung, für dieses Missverständnis, das diese Auszeichnung zweifellos ist, denn, wie Sie wissen, ist alles ein Missverständnis und ich erinnere Sie noch einmal nachdrücklich an den Tod, daran, dass alles mit dem Tode zu tun hat, vergessen Sie ihn nicht ... vergessen Sie ihn nicht, vergessen Sie ihn nicht ... (p.349)

As the ceremony for this prize was not held we cannot be sure that Bernhard would have actually given the speech in the form in which it has been recorded. It seems rather contrived and theatrical in comparison with his State Prize speech and, not surprisingly, appears to mock those who patently misunderstood him at that time. As we shall see the element of the theatrical is strongly connected with

Bernhard's work and we get some indication of the reason for this in his next speech, this one given upon reception of the Georg Büchner Prize awarded by the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung in Darmstadt in 1970.

This again is a short speech, not much longer than the one for the Austrian State Prize, and is marked by the same terse, elliptical style, perhaps because it was presented before an audience which one would expect to understand his work and therefore did not require any explanations. Whilst death is not mentioned specifically its presence again dominates and determines the line of thought, and one could easily add the opening phrases of the two previous speeches as a bracketed introduction without interfering with its logical development. In fact, it seems that this is what one is expected to do because this speech is almost self-explanatory when the earlier speeches are recalled. From the basis of these two speeches Bernhard now establishes his view of language, the reason for man's desperate situation, the position of literature and his reason for writing.

Commencing almost in what seems to be mid-thought Bernhard states that our existence is chaotic and fatally deceptive as a result of our so-called progress, an idea strongly reminiscent of his first speech:

> Verehrte Anwesende, wovon wir reden, ist unerforscht, wir leben nicht, vermuten und existieren aber als Heuchler, vor den Kopf Gestossene, in dem fatalen, letzten Endes letalen Missverständnis der Natur, in welchem wir heute durch Wissenschaft verloren sind. [5]

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[5] Thomas Bernhard, "Nie und mit nichts fertig werden," in

But instead of leaving it at that, as he had done before, Bernhard immediately "explains" the reason for this desperate situation from which we are unable to extricate ourselves. The problem is not so much human weakness but the inability to communicate in general, and in particular the inability to communicate truth - the only truth being the inescapability of death. The reason for this is to be found, according to Bernhard, in language or, more precisely, in words which are unable to convey this one truth because instead of transmitting meaning they actually obscure it. Thus Bernhard:

> die Wörter, mit welchen wir aus Verlassenheit im Gehirn hantieren, mit Tausenden und Hunderttausenden von ausgeleierten, uns durch infame Wahrheit als infame Lüge, umgekehrt durch infame Lüge als infame Wahrheit erkennbare in allen Sprachen, in allen Verhältnissen, die Wörter, die wir uns zu reden und zu schreiben und die wir uns als Sprechen zu verschweigen getrauen, die Wörter, die aus nichts sind und die zu nichts sind und die für nichts sind, wie wir wissen und was wir verheimlichen, die Wörter, an die wir aus Ohnmacht verrückt und aus Verrücktheit verzweifelt sind, die Wörter infizieren und ignorieren, verwischen und verschlimmern, beschämen und verfälschen und verkrüppeln und verdüstern und verfinstern nur. (p.83)

Consequently anybody who engages in using words to try to convey a sense of truth is actually engaging in a self-defeating exercise and destroying that sense of truth. Because of this we begin to use certain set-phrases or catch-words so that our speech and behaviour come to resemble a well-rehearsed theatrical performance in which only specified lines are allowed, and these lines are so

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[5] (cont'd) *Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung. Jahrbuch 1970* pp.83-84, p.83.

over-used that they become redundant:

> wir geben eine Theatervorstellung, prolongiert ohne Zweifel in die Unendlichkeit ..., aber das Theater, in welchem wir auf alles gefasst und in nichts kompetent sind, ist ... immer ein solches der sich vergrössernden Geschwindigkeit und der verpassten Stichwörter ..., es ist absolut ein Theater der Körper - in zweiter Linie der Geistesangst und also der Todesangst .... (p.83)

However, man is propelled by a fear of death - of which he is aware but which he seldom acknowledges - and is also compelled to try to articulate his fear. Combined, these two drives, i.e. the fear of death and the compulsion to articulate it, act as a creative force:

> wir denken, verschweigen aber: wer denkt, löst auf, hebt auf, katastrophiert, demoliert, zersetzt, denn Denken ist folgerichtig die konsequente Auflösung aller Begriffe ... Wir sind (und das ist Geschichte und das ist der Geisteszustand der Geschichte): die Angst, die Körper- und die Geistesangst und die Todesangst als das Schöpferische ... (pp.83-84)

As a product of this creative drive literature is to be seen as an expression of man's fear and as an effort to convey it. But, because of the inability of words to convey truth, supposedly the reason behind a book, this cannot be perceived or understood by anyone other than the author. Language, however, does more than just mask the truth, it actually presents in its place a false image of what is actually depicted:

> Was wir veröffentlichen, ist nicht identisch mit dem, was ist, die Erschütterung ist eine andere, die Existenz ist eine andere ..., es sind ganz andere Zustände ... (p.84) [57]

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[57] This break between the individual's reality and the communicated form of that reality is noted by the figure Roithamer in Bernhard's novel *Korrektur*, who observes that whatever he describes in his manuscript the description is

Despite this falsification of reality by language the drive to create is, however, an existential one and is therefore immutably connected with the author's will to live. Once he stops writing he, in effect, stops living as he no longer has a release for the irritation of his existence and, therefore, is forced to succumb to that irritation and the despair which accompanies it:

> Das Problem ist, mit der Arbeit fertig zu werden, und das heisst, mit dem inneren Widerwillen und mit dem äusseren Stumpfsinn ... es ist eine Frage der Geisteskonstitution und der Geisteskonzentration ... Das Problem ist, mit der Arbeit fertig zu werden ... es ist die Frage: weiter, rücksichtslos weiter, oder aufhören, schlussmachen ... es ist die Frage des Zweifels, des Misstrauens und der Ungeduld. (p.84)

This short speech would seem to be the key to Bernhard's literary production as it (obliquely) explains the motives behind it. However, it does require elements

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[5]"(cont'd) actually something different from the described object or idea, that "immer alles anders ist, als beschrieben." (*Korrektur*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975, p.355.) The first person narrator in the supposedly autobiographical work *Der Keller* also formulates this idea in terms similar to those used in the speech for the Georg-Büchner prize: "Die Wahrheit, denke ich, kennt nur der Betroffene, will er sie mitteilen, wird er automatisch zum Lügner. Alles Mitgeteilte kann nur Fälschung und Verfälschung sein, also sind immer nur Fälschungen und **Ver**fälschung mitgeteilt worden .... Wir beschreiben einen Gegenstand und glauben, wir haben ihn wahrheits**gemäss** und wahrheits**getreu** beschrieben, und müssen feststellen, es ist nicht die Wahrheit. Wir machen einen Sachverhalt deutlich, und es ist nicht und niemals der Sachverhalt, den wir deutlich gemacht haben wollen, es ist immer ein anderer. Wir müssen sagen, wir haben nie etwas mitgeteilt, das die Wahrheit gewesen wäre, aber den **Versuch**, die Wahrheit mitzuteilen, haben wir lebenslänglich nicht aufgegeben. Wir wollen die Wahrheit sagen, aber wir sagen nicht die Wahrheit. Wir beschreiben etwas wahrheitsgetreu, aber das Beschriebene ist etwas anderes als die Wahrheit." (Thomas Bernhard, *Der Keller*, Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 1976, pp.42-44.)

from the two previous speeches to be fully understood, but once they are taken into account we have before us the concepts according to which Bernhard writes. Yet before commencing the study of the structural features of isolation in the plays as a consequence of his poetological viewpoints, we need to look at certain key aspects of Bernhard's fundamental concept as expressed in his works - such as the figures' behaviour, the themes of death and isolation, and the significance of literature - to see how he represents and connects these ideas in the fictitious world of his plays.

Not surprisingly, considering the uniformity of Bernhard's work, Wolfschütz notes that each of the main characters is marked by a loss of contact with external reality and is "suspended in the abyss of his own inner world." [58] However, not all of Bernhard's figures behave in the same way, despite this shared self-awareness. Brettschneider divides their behaviour into two groups: The first group consists of intellectuals who raise the dilemma of their existential position to the central part of their consciousness by continually analyzing and reflecting upon their situation, but who are nevertheless unable to escape its deadly mechanisms, for example, the Prince in *Verstörung* or the playwright in *Die Jagdgesellschaft*. The other group consists of degraded, often degenerate and compulsive figures who suffer in an uncomprehending world - their own -

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[58] See Wolfschütz, p.215.

as they are unable to rationalize like the intellectuals, such as the mother in *Am Ziel* or "die Gute" in *Ein Fest für Boris*, or others who rebel against their situation with a destructive vitality directed towards a pointless death which signifies an end, but not a solution, like the General in *Die Jagdgesellschaft*. [5] But whatever category the figures might fit into they have lost contact with the external world and have become self-reflective and isolated, unable to communicate with those around them because the only thing they have to communicate is their own reality - the knowledge of the inescapability of death.

As can be seen, the only choice available in Bernhard's world is not whether to die or not, but when to die. Consequently, once they have come to this conclusion, Bernhard's figures are also aware that their existence is coloured by a certain theatricality, a playing out of a role, fully aware of the inevitability of the end of this role. This sense of the theatrical nature of life is given concrete form not only in Bernhard's plays, but also as a theme in his prose. For instance, in the fragment and film-script *Der Italiener* the nameless house-owner commits suicide after conducting a rehearsal of the annual play precisely because he recognises in it the theatricality and

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[5] See Werner Brettschneider, *Zorn und Trauer. Aspekte deutscher Gegenwartsliteratur* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1979), p.188. It is important to realise, as Alfred Barthofer notes, that man is the centre of Bernhard's universe and that the bleak world which he inhabits is largely man-made. See Barthofer, "The Plays," p.25.

artificiality of his own existence.[60] The symbolic connection thus made between the theatre and death is furthered when it is explained that the "Lusthaus" where the play is performed every year was also the scene of a mass-murder at the end of the war. [61]

However, returning to the inability to communicate, Bernhard's figures, instead of remaining silent, are compelled to speak, seemingly in order to attempt to break down the walls of their isolation but also, of course, to give form to his work as a whole. But, as Brettschneider notes, these attempts merely prove to the characters just how isolated they are. In this respect Brettschneider, quoting from *Das Kalkwerk*, states:

> die Versuche des Menschen, in Kommunikation mit den anderen zu gelangen, (bleiben) "Expeditionen in die Urwälder des Alleinseins." [62]

The reason for this reconfirmation of the individual's isolation is to be found in the means of communication itself - language - because the use of language represents, from Bernhard's point of view, an act which is as irrelevant as any other under the perspective of death. [63] Therefore language, being an example of the emptiness and pointlessness of life in itself, becomes symbolic of the message the individual is trying to convey. Unable to transmit any

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[60] Thomas Bernhard, *Der Italiener* (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 1971).
[61] See Jurgensen, *Der Kegel im Wald*, p.21.
[62] Brettschneider, p.188. See also Jurgensen, *Der Kegel im Wald*, p.12.
[63] See Schmidt-Dengler, p.71.

meaning, language is systematically reduced to the carrier of trivial banalities, a symbol of mental sterility and apathy as a consequence of the knowledge of the unassailability of death, and final proof of the individual's total isolation. [64] Or, as Bernhard states in *Drei Tage*:

> Verständlichmachen ist unmöglich, das gibt es nicht. Aus der Einsamkeit, aus dem Alleinsein wird ein verstärkteres Alleinsein, Abgeschnittensein. [65]

Therefore, as a result of this inability of language to transmit meaning or truth, the individual is no longer capable of extending outside himself, remaining trapped in an inner world dominated by the one, overwhelming thought of death - "der einzige Gedanke." [66] Steinert, too, notes the close link between the themes of death and isolation in Bernhard's works. He says that the individual's realisation of his existential position brings with it the sense of isolation, that the "Todesmotiv" and the "Einsamkeitsmotiv" are, in fact, mutually dependent. [67]

In both plays and prose alike Bernhard gives this "Einsamkeitsmotiv" concrete form in the physical distancing of the figures from the rest of society. Thus the theme of the relationship between the individual and faceless society ("die Masse" or "Menge") can also be seen as a fundamental element in his works, a particular aspect of the general theme of isolation. [68] Consequently Bernhard's figures live

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[64] See Barthofer, "Das Cello und die Peitsche," p.304.
[65] Thomas Bernhard, *Drei Tage*, in *Der Italiener*, p.147.
[66] This is the title of the first section of Gamper's study of Bernhard. See Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.7.
[67] See Steinert, p.91.
[68] See Jurgensen, *Der Kegel im Wald*, p.15.

in remote areas - e.g. the mad Prince in *Verstörung* who lives in a mountain-top castle - or are physically unable to take an active part in society - such as "die Gute" in *Ein Fest für Boris* who is a cripple. This physical distancing is usually accompanied by signs of madness or illness which have ostensibly been the cause of this isolation but which are, in fact, projections or externalisations of the individual's mental condition. [10] In this respect, according to Gamper, the "accident" which led to the physical crippling of "die Gute" is not to be seen as the cause of her isolation but as a sympton of it, generated by her existential crisis. [11] The same can be said of the Prince's madness - the realisation of the futility of life gave rise to his madness which in turn made him unable to function in society.

Despite their recognised inability to communicate many of Bernhard's figures are engaged in writing in one form or another - books, letters, plays, the editing of diaries and so on. All their efforts are shown to be futile (a fact often acknowledged by them) [12] and are also to be seen as a form of madness. As we have seen, this is because attempts to communicate are doomed to failure and therefore any

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[10] ibid. p.12.
[11] See Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.8.
[12] See *Ein Fest für Boris*: (die Gute)"Die Wahrheit ist dass kein Mensch von mir einen Brief will/ niemand/ nichts" (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970, p.15.); and *Am Ziel*: (Schriftsteller) "Wir haben nur Beweise für das Scheitern/ der Schriftsteller/ Alle Schriftsteller sind gescheitert/ es hat immer nur gescheiterte Schriftsteller gegeben" (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981, pp.105-106.)

attempt at the expression of the inner self in spite of this is regarded by Bernhard as a kind of illness. Since, as Jurgensen observes, the expression of the inner self ("die geistige Identität") is an essential element of literature this means that, for Bernhard, literature itself is a form of madness. Or, in Jurgensen's own words:

> Die geistige Identität ... gibt sich in der literarischen Darstellungsform zu erkennen. Die Literatur selbst wird so bei Bernhard zu einem Ausdruck der Verrücktheit. [72]

This situation leads to an interesting paradox because a major part of Bernhard's work deals with the "madness" of literature, yet he, himself, is continually producing examples of this madness. However, Bernhard is not unaware of this situation; he is, in fact, very much conscious of it as the reflection upon the function and validity of literature is an often occurring element in his literary production.

The background to this curious attitude to literature is Bernhard's claimed aversion to books, which cannot be taken too seriously, and which he claims to have recognised at a fairly early age. Thus Bernhard in the interview *Drei Tage*:

> Und ganz früh hab' ich - so bis siebzehn, achtzehn Jahre -, hab' ich nichts so gehasst wie Bücher ... Ich hab' bei meinem Grossvater gelebt, der hat geschrieben, und es war eine riesige Bibliothek da, und immer mit diesen Büchern zusammen zu sein, durch diese Bibliothek gehen zu müssen, jeden Tag, war für mich allein grauenhaft .... [73]

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[72] Jurgensen, *Der Kegel im Wald*, p.12.
[73] *Der Italiener*, p.155.

The cause of this revulsion is to be found in that, for Bernhard - in accordance with his poetological concepts - all books are evidence of the pain and futility of life and therefore their presence, especially in such large numbers, as in his grandfather's library, is a constant reminder to him of what he sees as life's limitations.

It would seem then that Bernhard is either indulging in heavy irony or is undergoing a form of psychotherapy when he writes. In this respect Wolfschütz comments on what he sees as Bernhard's chosen form of therapy:

> rather than search for a meaningful pattern to his personal suffering, Bernhard, through his writing, intensifies his agony and raises it to an absolute and universal condition in which all traces of personal experience are lost. [74]

This observation is obviously supported by Bernhard's own statements on his writing, such as those in the Georg-Büchner-Prize speech and these in *Drei Tage*:

> Das Furchtbarste für mich ist Prosa schreiben ... Überhaupt das Schwierigste ... Und von dem Augenblick an, in dem ich das bemerkt hab', **habe ich mir geschworen**, nur noch Prosa zu schreiben ... Und wahrscheinlich ... warum bin ich eigentlich zum Schreiben gekommen, warum schreibe ich Bücher? **Aus Opposition gegen mich selbst plötzlich**, und gegen diesen Zustand - weil mir Widerstände, wie ich schon einmal gesagt habe, **alles** bedeuten ... Ich wollte eben diesen ungeheuren Widerstand, und dadurch schreibe ich Prosa ... [75]

However, as Wolfschütz notes, this confrontation with the pain of his own existence has a therapeutic function for Bernhard, but not in a psychotherapeutic sense:

> While a psychoanalyst believes that the

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[74] Wolfschütz, p.220.
[75] *Der Italiener*, pp.154-155.

> establishment of a chain of cause and effect ... will assist understanding ... and thus help overcome the trauma of personal experience, Bernhard takes the opposite road and seeks freedom in a form of self-exorcism. It is in this sense that in ... *Drei Tage* he described himself as a surgeon desperately performing a series of operations on himself to rid his body of the cancerous growths which keep on forming. ''

Therefore, according to Bernhard's poetological concepts (which govern even his statements about his work), the writing about death and the pain of life - his own, intensified to a universal condition - is more than just an aesthetic provocation of his own anxieties. Rather, it is actually, as Steinert observes, an existential necessity, the one thing which keeps Bernhard from succumbing to despair. This, however, does not prevent us from approaching these texts from an aesthetic point of view as long as we remember that they can also be seen as "literarische Selbstanalyse" and "schriftstellerische Therapie" and that the form and content are determined to a certain extent by these factors. ''

'' Wolfschütz, p.220. See also Thomas Bernhard, *Der Italiener*, p.148.
'' See Steinert, p.18.

3. The Structural Features of Isolation

Before proceeding with the analysis of isolation as a structural feature in Bernhard's plays it is necessary to establish fully what isolation means in these works. A psychological definition tells us that isolation is "minimal social contact or maximum social distance between individuals and/or groups." [1] On the surface this would appear to be a rather obvious and easily applied definition: The Prince in *Verstörung* and "die Gute" in *Ein Fest für Boris* are obviously isolated as they both have minimal social contact and the Prince, at least, is definitely at a maximum social distance from anyone else.

However, in relation to Bernhard's works this is only half the picture as a deeper look at this definition reveals. Unlike many other modern playwrights who depict isolation by means of a single figure, Bernhard uses at least two figures in all of his plays and shows their isolation, instead, by the lack of inter-action between them. He concentrates on the contrast between their physical closeness and their mental or emotional distance from each other, i.e. their "minimal social contact" in a more profound sense. Indeed, in Bernhard's plays it is the very presence of other figures which increases the individual's sense of isolation because, try as he might, he can do no more than confirm to himself the futility of his own existence in trying to communicate with those other figures. As

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[1] *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, Vol.2, 1972.

Jurgensen points out it is only through and in contrast with society that the individual can identify himself. Therefore, in Bernhard's world, the individual is in a constant struggle with society because he is dependent on it for the establishment of his own identity, but at the same time separated from it because he is unable to communicate with it. ''

A stuctural approach to isolation, then, will concentrate on the signs of this isolation and will examine the language and the dramatics of this feature of the plays. It is not important what is said, but how it is said; and how it is shown on the stage is more important than what is shown. This first area of language looks at how Bernhard, in accordance with his poetological concepts, destroys meaning and causes a breakdown in communication. The second area of the actual dramatic structuring of the plays examines the dramatic form to see if this reflects the content. In both cases it is necessary to ask the question whether the adopted form is suitable as a vehicle for the literary concepts established in the previous chapter.

3.1 The Language of Isolation

In the light of Bernhard's poetological concepts there are two main areas of language which need to be investigated to see how he actually conveys these concepts in his plays. This study will try to find evidence of the figures'

'' See Jurgensen, *Der Kegel im Wald*, p.22.

disturbed states of mind resulting from the awareness of their existential position, and evidence of their inability to extend beyond themselves - i.e. to communicate with those around them. To do this I shall examine several structural features which seem to reflect the figures' mental condition - these features are characteristic of Bernhard's plays and occur in all of them and therefore seem to be designed especially to reflect this condition. The features to be examined are the monologues, the failure to answer questions, the occasional breakthroughs in communication and the broken syntax. If, as Jurgensen claims, Bernhard has set out to present "die radikale Versprachlichung der einen banalen Einsicht: die Sterblichkeit des Menschen," [**] then we would expect the language of the plays to reflect this clearly. This is not to say that the verbalisation of man's condition consists solely of reports on this state, but that the form of these reports is also coloured by it and actually presents a truer picture than a plain report. This is because, as we have seen, Bernhard's concept has as one of its basic ideas the failure of words to transmit meaning. [*] Given this it seems only logical to focus on the form rather than on the content.

[**] Jurgensen, "Die Sprachpartituren des Thomas Bernhard," in *Annäherungen*, p.99. See also Hans Höller, *Kritik einer literarischen Form*, p.15 and Hannemann, "Totentanz der Marionetten: Monotonie und Manier bei Thomas Bernhard," in *Modern Austrian Literature*, Vol.13, No.2, 1980, pp.123-150, p.124.

[*] See Thomas Bernhard, "Nie und mit nichts fertig werden," p.83

3.1.1 Monologues

It has already been noted that Bernhard, unlike other modern playwrights, chooses not to depict isolation by the use of one single character on the stage. Instead he shows it by the non-interaction between several figures on stage at the same time. Despite the presence of other figures, however, the dialogue in Bernhard's plays does not indicate communication, but rather its opposite. This is revealed mainly by two particular features - monologues and unanswered questions, which are actually a consequence of the monologues.

In a play such as *Der Schein trügt* in which only two characters appear, one would expect a tendency towards monologues in the form of narrative and personal reflections, because conversational opportunities are naturally limited in such a situation. On the other hand in *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*, in which seven characters appear, or *Ein Fest für Boris*, with sixteen speaking parts, one would expect a certain amount of all-round participation. These expectations are severely disappointed, however, as in the former play Moritz Meister dominates the "conversation" throughout and in the latter "die Gute" does the same despite the eagerness of the cripples from the asylum to contribute. Furthermore, even in *Der Schein trügt* the speeches are imbalanced, the artist Karl holding forth almost throughout. This overwhelming dominance of one figure in each of these plays gives an initial indication of the

limited development of their plots, such as they are, an indication which is enhanced by the static nature of the monologues themselves.

Hartmut Zelinsky has spoken of the "kontrollierte Dynamik" of Bernhard's writing in which a small number of themes continually reoccur in each work. [32] These themes are sometimes related, sometimes not, but there is rarely a logical progression from one idea to the next so that the monologues lack direction and have no goal. Or as Hannemann states in his study of mannerism in Bernhard's works:

> Das assoziativ herangetriebene Wortmaterial wird nicht im traditionellen Sinne einer übergeordneten Zielvorstellung gesichtet und gesiebt. [33]

The ramblings appear to be arbitrary but are, of course, carefully constructed by Bernhard to reflect the hopelessness of his characters' existence. If they do have something to communicate it is lost in a morass of words from which only trivialities can emerge. [34] Consequently, as Höller points out, Bernhard has removed all possibilities of self-expression - in the sense of self-identity - from the characters' monologues. Thus Höller, referring to "die Gute" in *Ein Fest für Boris*:

> In ihren Monologen werden alle sprachlichen Momente, die lebendige Identität und Entwicklung ausdrücken könnten, schemenhaft entleert. [35]

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[32] See Hartmut Zelinsky, "Thomas Bernhards *Amras* und Novalis," in *ÜTB*, pp.24-33, p.31.
[33] Hannemann, p.137.
[34] See Barthofer who says of *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*: "(das) kreisende meist schon im Ansatz steckenbleibende Sprechen verflacht meist in den Niederungen des Banalen und Trivialen." "Das Cello und die Peitsche," p.306.
[35] Höller, *Kritik einer literarischen Form*, p.36.

These points can be seen clearly in the opening monologue of *Am Ziel*. The first act of this play is filled with the monologuic ruminations of the central figure, known simply as "die Mutter," as she and her daughter await the arrival of the figure known simply as the "dramatischer Schriftsteller" before going to the Dutch coast together. The second act is again dominated by the mother, the playwright only being able to provide a few interruptions in the mother's flood of words. This is perhaps Bernhard's most static play as there is very little action in any sense: The figures sit most of the time and talk about doing things, but the only movement has to do with such things as making the tea and the change of scene between acts. This inactivity is reflected upon in the monologues and can be seen as the theme of the play itself.

The play begins with the dynamic dramatic device of the mother appearing to be speaking in mid-sentence. However, this dynamism is lost almost immediately by the use of repetition and the apparently illogical jumps in the subject-matter. Therefore, in the opening, rather cryptic lines we encounter the following five ideas in quick succession: Regret at having gone to the theatre; regret at having waited for the playwright after the performance; what was said upon meeting him; and the beginning of what is a fairly lengthy discourse on the vagaries of success:

> Es war meine Idee
> es war mein Wunsch
> es war meine Idee
> Warum sind wir überhaupt hingegangen

> Jetzt rächt es sich
> dass wir das Abonnement genommen haben
> Wir hätten nicht solange warten sollen
> Warum habe ich ihn nur eingeladen
> Ein grosser Fehler
> **Rette sich wer kann** kein schlechter Titel
> Ein Talent habe ich gesagt
> Sie sind ein grosses Talent
> dabei bin ich auch gar nicht so überzeugt
> Erfolge sind auch nur Zufall
> irgend etwas macht den Erfolg ''

Such rapid progress through so many ideas does not suggest a logical development of thought, and indeed this is the case. The immediacy of the opening is reduced initially by the repetition of the first line ("es war meine Idee") and by the two rhetorical questions expessing dismay at her actions ("Warum sind wir überhaupt hingegangen" and "Warum habe ich ihn nur eingeladen"). The jumps from idea to idea are too sudden, no single idea having time to develop properly, so that it seems as if new ideas pop out before the previous one is finished. Therefore, in three consecutive lines there are three different ideas:

> Ein grosser Fehler
> **Rette sich wer kann** kein schlechter Titel
> Ein Talent habe ich gesagt

The abruptness and inconsequence of these three ideas is produced mainly by a lack of conjunctions or linking phrases so that although there is actually a semblance of a link between them it is up to the audience to make this connection. Even then there is no linear development - the mother is speaking as she thinks, making associative

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'' Thomas Bernhard, *Am Ziel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981), p.9. All references are to this edition, page numbers appear in the text.

connections obvious only to herself - the "assoziativ herangetriebene Wortmaterial" which Hannemann speaks of. Therefore we can see that the mother's speech is a reflection of her state of mind as Bernhard has made use of the stream-of-consciousness technique in which no explanations are given and the audience is left to make the associative links themselves.

With these quick jumps between ideas it looks at first as if a wide range of ideas will be forthcoming. However, this is not the case as the mother proceeds to introduce a few more ideas and then begins to repeat them in a jumble of inconsequence. After having dwelt on the closing episode of the new play she returns to the subject of talent previously introduced in the brief recollection of what was said after the performance. This is quickly followed by a brief return to a theme brought up in the discourse on the close of the play so that, combined, this group of six lines acts as a refrain of what has gone before:

> kein Mensch weiss was
> auch wenn alle Voraussetzungen gegeben sind
> kein Mensch weiss was
> Es hätte auch schiefgehen können
> Ich dachte schon es wird nichts
> Dieses Bohren diese Unnachgiebigkeit
> Sind das denn Menschen habe ich mich gefragt
> Dann applaudierten sie plötzlich wie die Wilden
> Ich gönne ihm das natürlich
> Zuerst dachte ich es wird nichts
> im Elend zu wühlen
> den Leuten ihren eigenen Dreck ins Gesicht
> werfen
> von der Bühne herunter
> Ich dachte es wird nichts
> Immer mehr Dreck auf der Bühne
> bis die ganze Bühne voller Dreck ist
> dann geht der Vorhang zu

wenn die ganze Bühne voller Dreck ist
Was ist das anderes als Dreck
Ja natürlich die haben Talent
die jungen Leute
und die alten Künstler die Theaterschmierfinken
Findest du nicht
dass das gemein ist den Leuten
nichts als ihren Dreck zu zeigen (p.10)

The next two lines concern the domestic triviality of the tea being made and are succeeded by a completely new and totally unconnected idea - that of the size of the bill left by the stonemason for the renovation of the grave-stone of the mother's late husband:

(ruft hinein)
Mach ihn stark
ich will den Tee stark haben
Hörst du der verlangt achtzigtausend
Alle sind grössenwahnsinnig
eine vollkommen grössenwahnsinnige Gesellschaft
Die ganze Gesellschaft ist mit sich selbst
durchgegangen
(legt die Rechnung weg)
Ich hätte die Gruft nicht erneuern lassen sollen
ich hätte sie lassen sollen wie sie ist
der umgestürzte Obelisk war ja doch eine
Originalität
actzigtausend nur für die Aufstellung des
umgefallenen Obelisken
und ein bisschen Beton (pp.10-11)

With this the main themes have all been introduced and from now on are repeated in various forms thoughout the play. From the subject of concrete the mother moves directly back to the playwright and the question of literary relevance, followed by a return to the general subject of stonemasons and other manual labourers:

Ein dramatischer Schriftsteller
was ist das schon
die Leute haben Erfolg und nützen gleich alles
aus
Veröffentlichte Gedanken
alles abgenützt auf dem Papier und insgesamt

eine Gemeinheit
Sie bilden sich ein sie sind weltbewegend
Er behauptet er sei Anarchist
ein dramatischer Schriftsteller sei ein
Anarchist
Eine ganze Stunde über Schauspieler
und dabei hat er nicht ein einzigesmal an mich
gedacht
dass ich alt bin und schwer höre
...
und dass mich im Grunde nichts mehr interessiert
jedenfalls nicht die Schauspielkunst
jedenfalls nicht das Theater
...
Die Steinmetze
sind unverschämt
alle Handwerker sind unverschämt
Die ziehen die Intellektuellen aus
vollkommen
Der Triumph der Handwerker mein Kind
die Arbeiter triumphieren
aber das haben die Unsrigen noch nicht begriffen
seit vierzig oder fünfzig Jahren
triumphieren die Arbeiter
die haben das Heft in der Hand
die diktieren die bestimmen
sie machen uns den Garaus (pp.11-12)

Next, tea is mentioned again, this time with greater emphasis on the personal relationship of the mother and daughter, and forms a frame around a further reference to the father's grave-stone, which in turn is succeeded by a return to regrets at having gone to the theatre, an act seen purely as a habit:

(Tochter will den Tee einschenken
Mutter hindert sie daran)
Er ist noch nicht so weit
Wie du keine Ahnung vom Tee hast
hast du auch keine Ahnung von Weltgeschichte
mein Kind
Du musst ihn ziehen lassen
zwanzig Jahre bemühe ich mich
dir das beizubringen
Dein Vater wünschte einen Obelisk
er hat ihn sich selbst ausgesucht
das war schon damals lächerlich
Die Zeit hat sich von Grund auf verändert
alles hat sich verändert umgekehrt

alles ist auf den Kopf gestellt
virtuos mein Kind sehr virtuos
Nun schenk ein
(Tochter schenkt Tee ein)
Nun rächt es sich
dass ich unser Abonnement nicht aufgelöst habe
es ist nur noch eine Gewohnheit
wir lieben ja das Theater schon lange nicht mehr
wir geben nur vor es zu lieben
wir hassen es
weil es uns zur Gewohnheit geworden ist
(pp.12-13)

And so it goes on, each idea immediately following the previous one and each being returned to seemingly at random. It is this apparently random, but carefully structured repetition which, whilst appearing to move the monologue forwards, actually keeps it static. [8] Instead of developing her ideas the mother only varies their formulation slightly and consequently makes little progress in her ramblings.

It is not the concentration on certain themes that is important here but the fact that no progress is made in their conceptual development. The reason for this is that the mother - as is the case with all of Bernhard's figures - is not concerned with the impression she makes on those around her and is completely absorbed in herself. We must remember that in Bernhard's world she cannot communicate anything of any value anyway, so this self-absorption is as much a sign of her state of mind as the free-flowing stream-of-consciousness itself. Consequently in the excerpts from *Am Ziel* we can see that the only point of communication

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[8] On the "musicalization" of the texts as a result of this repetition and its place in Bernhard's work see Wolfscütz, pp.222-223 and p.228, and Jurgensen, "Die Sprachpartituren des Thomas Bernhard."

between mother and daughter - or at least the only evidence of any understanding passing between them - is confined to the domestic triviality of how to make the tea correctly, and even then these instructions still have to be repeated after twenty years of the same ritual. Therefore her directionless monologue is not intended to convey meaning but is rather meant to illustrate the impossibility of doing just that - it is not the content but the flow of words itself and the impression this makes which is relevant. Or, in the words of Franz Mennemeier:

> Nicht die prägnanten epischen Einzelheiten zählen, sondern der Redefluss selber, der "Ton" ... ist das zugrundeliegende Prinzip. ''

To achieve this "tone" Bernhard has his figures continually repeat not only the same ideas throughout the play, but also the same words, phrases and sentences, to such an extent that, as Barthofer says in his study of *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*, they begin to lose their meaning and become a reflection of the figures' mental destitution. Thus Barthofer:

> das fortwährende Wiederholen und Repetieren wird zur sprachlichen Manifestation der auf mechanischen Leerlauf aufgebauten und zur inhaltsarmen Gewohnheit herabgesunkenen Artistenexistenz. ''

'' Franz Mennemeier, "Nachhall des Absurden Dramas," in *Modernes deutsches Drama. Kritiken und Charakteristiken. Bd.2: 1933 bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1975), pp.307-320, p.308.

'' Barthofer, "Das Cello und die Peitsche," p.304. The formulation "Artistenexistenz" refers specifically to the figures' condition as performing artists - i.e. as circus performers and as "musicians." However, since in this play this is a metaphor for the theatricality of life in Bernhard's world the quotation can easily be applied to all of his figures and not just those involved in artistic

Wolfschütz, too, notes the repetition of certain phrases in particular and comments on the resulting loss of meaning through their over-use in this same play. As an acknowledgement of the futility of life and of his attempts to play Schubert's "Forellenquintett" perfectly, the ringmaster Caribaldi in *Die Macht der Gewohnheit* states:

> Wir wollen das Leben nicht
> aber es muss gelebt werden
> ...
> Wir hassen das Forellenquitett
> aber es muss gespielt werden '°

Wolfschütz comments on these phrases:

> *Die Macht der Gewohnheit* is so overloaded with such "universal truths" that the validity of individual statements is immediately cast into doubt. While clearly an absurdist parable at base, the play could equally well be seen as a political parable or as a parody of the very Salzburg Festival for which it was written ... From this point of view *Die Macht der Gewohnheit* ceases to be a piece of literature "about" something ... its theme, if indeed it can be said to have one, is the death of meaning. '1

In *Am Ziel* Bernhard launches into these "universal truths" straight away. Within the passages quoted above we can see four such formulations which initially seem to be profound observations on life, but which, because of their repetition through the play - and even within themselves - become meaningless. The first of these has to do with the chance element of success:

> Erfolge sind auch nur Zufall
> irgend etwas macht den Erfolg
> kein Mensch weiss was
> auch wenn alle Voraussetzungen gegeben sind

'1(cont'd) activities.
'° Thomas Bernhard, *Die Macht der Gewohnheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), p.43.
'1 Wolfschütz, p.228.

kein Mensch weiss was (pp.9-10)

The repetition of the all-embracing profundity "kein Mensch weiss was" indicates here more despair than insight, especially as it is connected with the subject of chance. The next significant statement has to do with society and is, in fact, a statement of the mother's own condition - as much as of the condition of the rest of society as she herself is egotistic, "grössenwahnsinnig" and has lost control of her life:

> Alle sind grössenwahnsinnig
> eine vollkommen grössenwahnsinnige Gesellschaft
> Die ganze Gesellschaft ist mit sich selbst
> durchgegangen (p.11)

The reason for this social decline appears to be the loss of importance of the intellectuals who are being rapidly replaced by manual labourers who, according to the mother, have no qualms about their unconsidered actions:

> Die Steinmetze
> sind unverschämt
> alle Handwerker sind unverschämt
> Die ziehen jetzt die Intellektuellen aus
> vollkommen
> ...
> die haben das Heft in der Hand
> die diktieren die bestimmen
> sie machen uns den Garaus (pp.11-12)

These three examples in such quick succession at the beginning of the play already bring into question their validity and that of any subsequent statements - it is simply too much in too short a time to be meaningful. So, by the fourth profound statement we must begin to suspect Bernhard's seriousness, especially as this one has to do with the very medium in which he is writing - drama:

> wir lieben ja das Theater schon lange nicht mehr
> wir geben nur vor es zu lieben
> wir hassen es
> weil es uns zur Gewohnheit geworden ist
> Aber wir hassen auch Shakespeare
> und wir hassen uns selbst
> wenn wir hineingehen (p.13)

Because this kind of statement continues to appear at all too frequent intervals through the play the subsequent loss of meaning not only affects what the mother says, but it also affects the way we view what the other characters say. Therefore, when the playwright tries, apparently in all seriousness, to enlighten the mother - and the audience - in the second act, his statements seem merely ridiculous, unable to carry any weight:

> Wir machen den Versuch
> die Gesellschaft zu ändern
> aber das gelingt natürlich nicht
> ...
> Die Gesellschaft kann nicht geändert werden
> ...
> Aber wir machen immer den Versuch
> ...
> Auf den Versuch kommt es an (pp.104-105)

Thematically this is an important statement and relates directly to Bernhard's own poetological concepts - but the structure of his language has disarmed it and it has become as empty as all other similar statements in this and in all his works.

We can see, then, that Bernhard's figures are trapped in their own world in which the only movement is a continual repetition of what has gone before. Consequently, their lives have reached an impasse which is reflected in their language. Or, as Gudrun Mauch observes, referring to

Bernhard's work in general and making use of a quotation from Herbert Gamper:

> Seine Waffen sind die gleichen ...: der endlose zur Tortur werdende Monolog, die "rücksichtslosen" Wiederholungen der immer gleichen Sprachformeln, Gesten, Situationen: "Wiederholungen und Wiederholungen der Wiederholungen." [12]

This continual repetition within the monologues is a reflection of the figures' existential position and a representation of the frozen mind subsequent to a realisation of this position, illustrated structurally as much as thematically.

3.1.2 Reason for Speaking

We have now reached what appears to be a paradoxical situation. It is clear that Bernhard's figures exist in a meaningless world and that they are isolated in this world because they are unable to reach out and communicate. If this is so it now needs to be established why they continue to talk at such length, seemingly in spite of this inability. In this context Benno von Wiese observes that while the figures talk continuously, they not only fail to communicate, they also intensify and confirm their feelings of isolation. Thus von Wiese:

> Sie reden fast ununterbrochen in geradezu geschwätzigen Wiederholungen. Aber ihre Rede bedeutet keine Brücke mehr von Mensch zu Mensch. Ihre Rede ist der vergebliche Versuch, sich einem anderen verständlich zu machen. Eben damit wird auch sie zum Werkzeug der Zerstörung ... Die Sprache wird

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[12] Gudrun B. Mauch, "Thomas Bernhard: Eine Einführung in sein Werk," in *Modern Austrian Literature*, Vol.12 (1979), pp.113-127, p.124.

> zum lebenslänglichen Kerker; sie beschädigt und verletzt den Menschen gleichsam in grausam verdoppelnder Weise, nachdem ihn ebenso Natur und Gesellschaft beschädigt und veletzt haben. Was immer der Mensch auch spricht, es wird zur Falle, die hinter ihm zuschlägt. '[3]

Hannemann is considerably harsher than this in his assessment of the figures' condition. Rather than just seeing them trapped in a prison as von Wiese does, he considers their continued use of the medium which imprisons them - language - a psychosis and therefore, as a reflection of their inner self, their speech is psychotic too, and has no communicative value because of this. In the words of Hannemann:

> Bernhards psychisch verkrampfte Figuren treiben wirre Wortblasen, die sich durch keine äussere Formgebung einfangen oder bannen lassen. Es ist die Poesie der Psychose: Die Sprache dient nicht als Verständigungsmittel; ihr Kommunikationswert ist gleich Null. '[4]

However, the individual has no other means of expressing himself - prison or psychosis, language is the only means of expressing what he feels. Hannemann is also aware of this and says that Bernhard presents "Zustandsberichte der völligen Isoliertheit" in which the unabating flow of words has become "das einzige Indiz für die unlösbaren Lebensspannungen im Innern der Person." '[5] It does not matter that these figures have only their own isolation and futility to communicate - they still have an existential need to

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'[3] Benno von Wiese (ed.), "Thomas Bernhard," in *Deutsche Dichter der Gegenwart. Ihr Leben und Werk* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1973), pp.632-646, p.635.
'[4] Hannemann, p.133.
'[5] ibid. p.128.

communicate it.

Thus the aim is no longer to communicate their isolation, but to try to overcome it - and the only means they have is speech. Jooss notes that the individual imagines an expansion of his consciousness - and therefore of himself - when he continually occupies himself with his own thoughts and does not allow the outside (real) world to enter his mind. In so doing he imagines he is giving his own being more space and becoming less "psychisch verkrampft." Thus Jooss:

> Durch die fortwährende Beschäftigung mit den eigenen Gedanken, den eigenen Gefühlsmöglichkeiten erfährt das Ich eine wesentliche Ausweitung seiner Bewusstseinspotenz .... Das monologisierende Ich schafft sich einen Freiraum. ''

That this is the case can be seen in the contrast between those passages in the plays in which a high count of first person pronouns occur and those in which they are absent in order to indicate a generalisation and thus an extension beyond the self. In the excerpts from *Am Ziel* we are confronted by three uses of "mein" in the first three lines, and the use of "ich" or "wir" in six of the following nine lines, illustating the concentration on the self:

Es war meine Idee
es war mein Wunsch
es war meine Idee
Warum sind wir überhaupt hingegangen
Jetzt rächt es sich
dass wir das Abonnement genommen haben
Wir hätten nicht solange warten sollen
Warum habe ich ihn nur eingeladen
Ein grosser Fehler
Rette sich wer kann kein schlechter Titel

'' Jooss, p.18.

Ein Talent habe ich gesagt
Sie sind ein grosses Talent
dabei bin ich gar nicht so überzeugt (p.9)

This is in marked contrast with the next six lines in which no first person pronouns appear. The effect here is to suggest a statement of generally accepted opinion, an idea from beyond the self - i.e. an expansion of the individual's space. However, that this is not so is shown by a return to the extensive use of "ich" in the next few lines. The sandwiching of a supposedly general idea between all these subjective statements does no more than confirm the true personal nature of these opinions:

Erfolge sind auch nur Zufall
irgend etwas macht den Erfolg
kein Mensch weiss was
auch wenn alle Voraussetzungen gegeben sind
kein Mensch weiss was
Es hätte auch
schiefgehen können
Ich dachte schon es wird nichts
Dieses Bohren diese Unnachgiebigkeit
Sind das denn Menschen habe ich mich gefragt
Dann applaudierten sie plötzlich wie die Wilden
Ich gönne ihm das natürlich
Zuerst dachte ich es wird nichts
im Elend zu wühlen
den Leuten ihren eigenen Dreck ins Gesicht
werfen
von der Bühne herunter
Ich dachte es wird nichts (pp.9-10)

The mother's attempts to extend beyond the confines of her own world are shown to be illusory - self-deceptive and self-conceived - by the very terms in which they are expressed.

Two exceptions to this extensive use of the first person pronoun are found in *Der Präsident* '' and *Über allen*

'' Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975.

Gipfeln ist Ruh. In the former, the President's wife continually refers to ideas presented to her by the Chaplain, usually framed by the phrase "sagt der Kaplan." On the other hand, Moritz Meister in *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*, continually talks about the figure called Professor Stieglitz in the tetralogy he has just finished. It soon becomes apparent, however, that Stieglitz is none other than Meister himself so that the supposed disclaimer "sagt Stieglitz" is nothing of the sort and is actually further evidence of his egotism as he is also quite free with the use of "ich." Both characters try to extend their worlds by "quoting" other people but all they do is illustrate how confined their own worlds really are. The President's wife shows no understanding of what the Chaplain tells her and merely repeats it uncomprehendingly, and Meister, when not obviously absorbed in his ego, projects the image of his alter ego, Stieglitz. Once again it is the terms used to express the supposed expansion of the consciousness which actually reveal its illusory nature and the true confines of the self.

It is clear that these confines are not only constraints, but that they are also creations of the figures themselves. Höller formulates this idea in almost Wittgenstein-like terms in reference to "die Gute" in *Ein Fest für Boris*. He says:

> Die Mauern ihrer Sprache stehen stellvertretend für die Mauern ihres Denkens, ihrer Existenz, ihrer Welt. Aber sie ist auch die Besitzerin dieser

Mauern.''

The figures are caught in a trap - they are driven to speak to try to overcome their feelings of isolation, whilst this very act actually reinforces this feeling. The alternative is, of course, to remain silent, but this - even if it were possible in a play, of course - only intensifies their desperation.

We have now gone beyond the simple dramatic requirement of a play with words, as the flow of words has become a life-line which cannot be rejected or else the overwhelming presence of death becomes apparent and must be succumbed to - in accordance with Bernhard's concepts. As Höller says, this idea can be reduced to a simple formulation which amply illustates the position of the figures: "Mitspielen oder Hinausgehen" '' - once the "game" is over there is only death for them, a situation which accounts for the frequent occurence of suicides in Bernhard's work.

3.1.3 Unanswered Questions

Further evidence of isolation is to be found in the high number of unanswered questions in the plays. Questions, by their very nature, indicate an effort to extend beyond the self, to communicate at some level with those around you. However, an examination of their use by Bernhard

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'' Höller, "Die Form der Sprache als Form der Gesellschaft. Zu Thomas Bernhards *Ein Fest für Boris*," in *Germanica Wratislaviensia*, 26 (1976), pp.203-219, p.213.
'' Höller, "'Es darf nichts Ganzes geben' und 'In meinen Büchern ist alles künstlich,'" in *Annäherungen*, pp.45-64, p.54.

reveals that this is far from the truth in his plays. In the passages quoted above from the first four pages of *Am Ziel* there are seven questions. '** Only two of these are actually directed towards the daughter - "Findest du nicht/ dass das gemein ist den Leuten/ nichts als ihren Dreck zu zeigen" and "Hörst du der verlangt achtzigtausend" (both p.10) - and to which no answer is either given or even appears to be expected as in both cases the mother continues, unconcerned at the lack of response, or not even appearing to wait for one. These two questions, whether intended to or not, take on a rhetorical air which serves to exclude the daughter from the mother's thoughts - or in other words they show the isolation of the mother from her daughter. The other five questions are clearly asked of the mother herself which indicates that she is concerned only with her own thoughts, seeming to try to give them some shape. Instead of helping her organise her thoughts, however, they actually reveal the despair she feels at her actions - e.g. "Warum sind wir überhaupt hingegangen" (p.10) - or her incomprehension of the functioning of the outside world - e.g. "Ein dramatischer Schriftsteller/ was ist das schon" (p.11) - both of which are reflections of a state of mind governed by the sense of the futility of her existence. As can be seen the questions have the same function as other parts of the monologues - they, too, are evidence of the

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'** For convenience sake I shall continue to refer to these passages which are as suitable as any others from Bernhard's repertoire as illustrations of my point.

individual's isolation and inability to communicate.

It then needs to be asked why those other characters are there if the monomanic central figures ask questions of them to which no answers are required or expected, so that it appears as if they are superfluous to the requirements of the play. As Fränzi Maierhöfer observes, a dramatic dialogue with only one protagonist is "cumbersome" or at least self-contradictory. He also notes, using a phrase from Peter Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, that a drama of this sort is no drama at all. Thus Maierhöfer:

> Ein Dialog, ein Zwiegespräch, ohne zweiten Pol, ohne Gegenpol, muss etwas Ungefüges sein und bleiben. "Ich-Dramatik" sei keine Dramatik. '[0]'

In a traditional sense of drama this may well be so, but with Bernhard's plays we are dealing with what could be classed as "Ich-Dramatik" and yet is still successful in production, despite its unwieldiness and lack of character inter-action - i.e. despite its non-dramatic form. Maierhöfer goes on to point out that monomaniacs need an audience to listen to them, even if they do not take this audience into account while they are talking, so that they are not speaking into a void. '[0]' In itself this is a good point, and in a traditional drama this might be a relevant and accurate observation. But with Bernhard this line of thinking would mean that he includes secondary figures simply as a convention, so that his monomaniacs have someone

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'[0]' Fränzi Maierhöfer, "Der verstummte Dialog. Probleme des modernen Dramas," in *Stimmen der Zeit*, Bd.186 (1970), pp.83-108, p.93.
'[0]' ibid. p.94.

to talk to. To some extent this is still true in his plays, but the real reason for their presence is generated by a feature of Bernhard's poetological concept and the nature of the individual's isolation. In order to illustrate this isolation properly Bernhard has to show the individual contrasted with his surroundings - so that it is obvious that the individual is part of, but not really part of society. For this he needs further figures. Taking us beyond the observations of Szondi and Maierhöfer, the presence of other figures in Bernhard's plays - even if it is just one - aggravates the individual's own sense of isolation because, despite their physical proximity and their never-ending efforts, they are unable to communicate, or become mentally close, on anything but the lowest level (i.e. domestic trivialities). Therefore Bernhard shows the intensification of the individual's pain by placing him in the midst of a major source of that pain - other people. In this context questions, which are normally a means of communicating directly, thus become further proof of the impossibility of doing just that and consequently in Bernhard's plays they often reveal the individual's pain and anxiety. In contrast, commands, which can be seen as a means of communicating on a basic, non-intellectual level, will often reveal anger and frustration, as this excerpt from *Am Ziel* shows:

> (Tochter will den Tee einschenken
> Mutter hindert sie daran)
> Er ist noch nicht so weit
> ...
> Du musst ihn ziehen lassen
> zwanzig Jahre bemühe ich mich

dir das beizubringen (p.12)

However, commands are also to be seen as constituting a vital part of the power game used by the monomanic figures to help establish their identities. In this respect Höller makes much of the social implications of such a situation, as does Ria Endres when the figure giving the commands is male. '[83] In their own right these approaches - Marxist and feminist respectively - help throw new light on Bernhard's work but fail to take into account the consistency and rigidity with which he adheres to his concept. This concept only allows for communication on the lowest level so it is not surprising that instructions to do with "menial" tasks such as housekeeping should be included - they are a necessary part of the illustration of this concept, a point overlooked by both of these critics.

3.1.4 Broken Syntax

So far we have looked at the more general characteristics of the monologues to see how they reflect the mental condition of the speakers. We have seen that the repetition of a limited number of ideas is a major feature of these monologues and is an externalisation of the individual's sense of imprisonment or isolation. As part of this externalisation the mental instability of the figures is shown in the stream-of-consciousness technique in that the disorder and imbalance of their minds is revealed in their

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'[83] See Höller, *Kritik einer literarischen Form*, particularly pp.31-45, and Ria Endres, *Am Ende angekommen*.

fragmentary, disjointed speeches. '[94] This reflection of inner turmoil is not restricted to the larger elements of the monologues' structure, its roots are to be found in the grammatical or syntactical structures, the basis upon which the rest is built. I have already remarked that many of the formulations of the main ideas include repetition in themselves and it is this aspect of the micro-structure which is important here.

The use of repetition is not confined to the straightforward re-occurrence of basically the same phrases, although this does occur (e.g. the often repeated phrase "Morgen Augsburg" in *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*). The particular feature of repetition which characterises Bernhard's plays is the use of chiasmus. Chiasmus is a stylistic device in which the first part of a phrase is repeated in the second, but in reversed order so that the pattern a,b/b,a results. For example, in *Die Macht der Gewohnheit* we encounter the following chiasmatic phrase in which the order of the first two lines is reversed in the next two:

> Für einen Betrunkenen
> ist kein Platz hier
> Das ist kein Platz hier
> für einen Betrunkenen (p.72)

However, chiasmus is not limited to a reversal of the lines themselves, but includes reversal in the order of single words, too, as this example, also from *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*, shows:

> Das Tier weg

'[94] See Schmidt-Dengler, p.61.

weg das Tier (p.144)

In the programme notes to the première of *Die Macht der Gewohnheit* Rolf Michaelis comments on the high occurrence of these chiasmatic constructions and notes that they are representative of the static nature of Bernhard's depicted world. Thus Michaelis:

> Der Chiasmus als verschränkte, in sich schwingende Kreisfigur ist Sinnbild der statischen Struktur von Bernhards Werk und Weltsicht. '[85]

Discussing this observation, Barthofer lists eleven occurrences of this device in this play, including the two above, which are only "einige Beispiele" but are illustrative of their high frequency and of the situations in which it is used. He then comments on the effect this has on the play as a whole, considering that more than one character uses the device. Thus Barthofer:

> Nichts könnte die geistige Stagnation und Inflexibilität menschlicher Erfahrungs- und Bewusstseinskraft plastischer veranschaulichen als der kontinuierliche Einsatz dieser Stilfigur. Der Umstand, dass es sich keinesfalls um die sprachliche Eigenheit einer Einzelfigur handelt, unterstreicht ihren allgemeingültigen Symbolwert. '[86]

Because it is seen as a universal feature, common to all the

'[85] Rolf Michaelis, "Die Macht der Gewohnheit," in *Programmheft des Salzburger Landestheaters zur Uraufführung des Stückes* (1974).

'[86] Barthofer, "Das Cello und die Peitsche," p.304. The other nine examples quoted by him are: "Weggehn/ nicht stehenbleiben/ nicht stehenbleiben/ weggehn" (p.28); "Zweifellos/ eine Ungezogenheit/ eine Ungezogenheit/ zweifellos" (p.142); "Den Saft schütteln/ schütteln den Saft" (p.119); "Morgen in Augsburg/ in Augsburg morgen" (p.117); "Was Sie sagen/ ist abgehackt/ alles ist abgehackt/ was Sie sagen" (p.106); "Es muss nicht Seide sein/ Seide muss es nicht sein" (p.116); "So geht es nicht/ es geht nicht so" (p.55); "Da Rettich/ Rettich da" (p.64); "Kopf und Körper/ Körper und Köpfe" (p.91).

characters in this play, the use of chiasmus is symbolic of man's mental stagnation and inflexibility in general. Therefore it is clear that the problem is not limited to one character as could be deduced from the plays *Am Ziel* or *Der Weltverbesserer*, for example, in which one character does most of the talking. Of course it could be said that the content of their speeches will also reveal the universality of the problem. But as we have seen the circular structure makes the content meaningless so that statements of a potentially important nature thematically are invalid for assessing a "Weltsicht." Barthofer makes a similar observation when he notes that this repetition from the smallest element up not only fails to expand the characters' world, it also reduces everything to superficiality. Thus Barthofer:

> Es muss in diesem Zusammenhang noch einmal besonders hervorgehoben werden, dass dieses ständige Zurückkehren zu bereits Gesagtem die geistige Erfahrungswelt der Charaktere weder erweitert noch vertieft, sondern der syntaktischen Regression gemäss zu leerer Oberflächlichkeit reduziert. [107]

Naturally, chiasmus is not the sole vehicle for this syntactic regression and Barthofer concludes with a summary of other features of the micro-structure - such as countless parallelisms, a lack of emotion arousing words and an obviously limited vocabulary - which assist in conveying the superficiality of what is said. [108] Regarding the limited vocabulary it can be seen that we are again following the

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[107] ibid.
[108] ibid.

lines of Wittgenstein's dictum "Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt." [9] The lack of emotion-arousing words mirrors a lack of emotional experience and the limited vocabulary in general reflects a world of limited horizons.

What Barthofer calls "parallelisms" would appear to be what Höller classes as wordplay; [10] in either case it is a further barrier to narrative development. The use of word-play is another indication of limited vocabulary and has the same effect as chiasmus: Many words are spoken over a number of lines but no progress is made in developing an idea, interest being focussed on associative connotations rather than theme development. In one speech by "die Gute" in *Ein Fest für Boris* we find the following examples of word-play, each of which lengthens the speech but fails to develop the original idea in any way:

> Sie wissen natürlich
> was ich besitze
> Sie kennen meinen Besitz
> wie ich hier sitze
> ...
> Meinen schlechten Geschmack
> der eine Folge meines guten Geschmacks ist
> ...
> Auf intelligente Weise Ihre Schweigsamkeit
> die Schweigsamkeit Ihrer Intelligenz (pp.17-18)

As can be seen, the monologues, which in themselves are a sign of self-absorption, are built on small syntactical units, none of which develop the ideas they are supposed to

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[9] Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Tractatus logico-philosophicus," in *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Schriften*, Vol.1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963), p.64, §5.6.
[10] See Höller, *Kritik einer literarischen Form*, p.39.

convey and which actually impede any potential progress towards the formulation of a communicable idea - i.e. an idea that can be understood by another character. Therefore it is wrong to suggest, as Gamper has done, that syntactic irregularities merely provoke ambiguity - they go much further and actually destroy the meaning of what is supposed to be conveyed when used to the extent that Bernhard uses them in his plays. [11] Obviously this is a method used by Bernhard to illustrate his idea that words falsify or destroy meaning - used in this way there is nothing else they can do.

Zdenko Škreb notes in passing that the language of Bernhard's plays is long-winded but constructed in small, chopped-up sentence fragments. [12] These features clearly reflect the characters' state of mind: The long-windedness he speaks of is created by the use of repetition and shows their self-absorption and the chopped-up sentences signify their mental instability.

3.1.5 Layout of the Text

A feature of the monologues which is not noticeable in performance, however, but which is striking in the printed text, is the layout of the lines on the page. This too is a means of revealing the characters' state of mind. The

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[11] See Gamper, "Einerseits Wissenschaft," p.12.
[12] See Zdenko Škreb, "Weltbild und Form bei Thomas Bernhard," in *Literatur aus Österreich. Österreichische Literatur. Ein Bonner Symposion* ed. Karl Konrad Polheim (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1981), pp.145-163, p.160.

following excerpt from a speech by the President's wife in *Der Präsident* is a good example of this feature:

> Mein Mann hat immer den Oberst gefragt
> ich habe **ihn** gefragt
> mein Mann hatte den Oberst
> ich hatte ihn
> die erste Instanz meines Mannes war der Oberst
> (schaut in den leeren Hundekorb)
> meine erste und letzte Instanz
> war mein Hund
> (schaut auf die Badezimmertür)
> Und jetzt haben sie uns beide weggenommen
> Niedergeschossen
> (der Frölich ins Gesicht)
> Plötzlich habe ich in seinen Augen gesehen
> dass er tot ist
> Herzschlag Frau Frölich
> Herzschlag
> Das Tier hatte bei dem Schuss auf den Oberst
> der Herzschlag getroffen
> Diese starren fragenden Augen Frau Frölich
> da habe ich ihn weggeworfen
> weggeworfen
> fallen lassen Frau Frölich
> auf den Boden
> da fiel er auf den Boden (p.54)

The first and most obvious feature is the vertically parallel arrangement of the lines which seems to emphasise certain phrases or even single words by isolating them in a short line. The shorter phrases such as "ich hatte ihn," "war mein Hund" and "dass er tot ist," as well as single words - "Herzschlag" and "weggeworfen" - stand out and immediately attract attention and appear to be particularly significant because of this. Indeed, as far as the themes go, this is true in the plays, especially when the words have to do with death, as the graphic isolation of these words and phrases is intended to enforce both its presence and the fear deriving from this. In this example we are given evidence of the isolation of the President's wife and

her realisation of the closeness of death after an assassination attempt on her husband in which the President is only wounded but her dog - who was her only real companion (i.e. a distraction from her feelings of isolation) - dies of a heart attack. Hence her preoccupation with the dog ("war mein Hund"), its death ("dass er tot ist") and the immediate cause of its death ("Herzschlag") is emphasised by these ideas being given prominent positions on their own, as is the wife's obvious reaction of horror as she recalls throwing the dead dog down ("weggeworfen"). On this level structure seems to be helping the content, but as we have seen, in a larger perspective the continual repetition of these central concepts reduces their meaning and effect so that there appears to be a contradiction in the general structure of the texts. This structure is clearly intended to destroy any meaning, but one of its basic elements serves to stress the importance of certain ideas. However, the concentration or stress on certain ideas leads to their repetition, which in turn negates what is being stressed.

The other obvious feature of the printed text is the absence of any punctuation marks. New sentences are indicated only by the use of capital letters at the beginnings of lines, and there are no full-stops, commas or any other punctuation. Visually this indicates an unbroken flow of words with no pause between different ideas and is therefore a graphic representation of the stream-of-consciousness technique in which ideas seem to flood out as if they are

spoken as soon as they are thought of, with no moment for reflection or consideration of what is being said. Just as we do not think in ordered, structured sentences replete with correct punctuation, neither do Bernhard's figures and he shows this by omitting the convention of written punctuation marks. Therefore, because these figures' monologues are not restrained by grammatical considerations in their efforts to formulate communicable ideas, the emphasis is thrown onto the words themselves to see why it is not possible to communicate in Bernhard's world.

The combination of these graphic features - the lack of punctuation is essentially a grammatical feature but its omission is registered visually first and this is the concern here - confirms that it is no longer what is being said, but how it is being said that is important. Bernhard seems to be indulging in a technical demonstration of his writing skills because, as Höller notes, the layout of the texts prevents immediate access to the content, with the result that, when the plays are read, form becomes primary and content secondary. Thus Höller:

> Die formale, gegenständliche Seite zieht die Aufmerksamkeit auf sich, bevor man sich noch den Inhalten der Sprache zugewendet hat. Die graphische Inszenierung grammatischer Figuren verstellt den unmittelbaren Zugang zu den sprachlichen Inhalten. Diese sind das Sekundäre, während die grammatischen Beziehungen mit gegenständlicher Selbständigkeit auftreten. '[3]

This, combined with the consistency of his style, leads one to suspect that Bernhard has carefully conceived and

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'[3] Höller, *Kritik einer literarischen Form*, p.14.

constructed this form of writing which Höller calls anti-organic, i.e. artificial. '[14] Consequently it is the style which is the essential element of Bernhard's writing and it is clearly designed to support his concept of the destructive nature of words. As a result of his command of this literary device - his method of writing - he is able to give credence to the theory of death which supposedly generates the breakdown in language. It must be realised, of course, that it is a carefully conceived and constructed device and that it has, by design, lost all semblance of vitality and contact with the real world. It is true when Bernhard says of his own work "In meinen Büchern ist alles **künstlich**," - especially when it comes to the language. '[15] It is not real, but artificial, and illustrates only the concepts proposed by Bernhard and is not a reflection of the outside world. He reveals a skillful, if not masterful control and use of his self-conceived device, but we must not be fooled by this into believing that his work represents a personal view of the real world. It is a view established by Bernhard for the purpose of writing. In this light, and this light only, is it possible to understand that the flow of words means nothing, that, as Brett-schneider says, it is the expansion of language by continuous talking, rather than its contraction into silence, which illustrates the impossibility of communicating the

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'[14] See Höller, "'Es darf nichts Ganzes geben,'" p.49.
'[15] Thomas Bernhard, *Der Italiener*, p.150.

truth.'''

3.2 The Dramatics of Isolation

However masterful Bernhard is in his control of language he must still take into consideration the genre in which he is writing and make suitable use of the visual, i.e. dramatic, presentation of his material. For this reason it is not enough to establish that the dialogue, which is largely a monologue, reflects the characters' isolation, we must also see if it is shown in the settings and situations of these characters. Discussing two of Bernhard's novels Jürgen Sang observes that the described external world is nothing more than a sign of the internal world, and vice-versa. ''' If this is the case in the novels we would expect the same to be true of the plays considering the consistency and uniformity of Bernhard's work. Therefore, just as in the analysis of the language of the plays I looked for signs which reflected the individual's mental state and sense of isolation, so in the analysis of the dramatic presentation I shall look for similar signs which can be interpreted as a physical representation of the characters' mental condition.

''' See Brettschneider, p.190.
''' See Jürgen Sang, *Reflektierte Rollenspiele. Untersuchungen zur Gegenwartsliteratur* (Frankfurt: Verlag Peter Lang, 1975), p.74.

3.2.1 The Settings

Earlier I stated that in the novel *Verstörung* the Prince's mental isolation is mirrored in his physical isolation in the mountain-top castle of Hochgobernitz. In a similar vein we find many of the dramatic figures exist in relatively inaccessible or uninviting locations. Therefore *Die Jagdgesellschaft* takes place in a hunting lodge in the middle of a diseased forest; [1] Immanuel Kant, in the play of the same name, is travelling by ship from Europe to America and is shown to be both physically and mentally "auf hoher See;" [2] Moritz Meister in *Über allen Gipfeln Ist Ruh* basks in his own glory at his house in the Alps; and the title figure of *Der Präsident* lives in what one would assume to be - for security reasons - a fairly inaccessible Presidential palace.

These are, however, reasonably obvious indications of the individual's isolation in a vast world. On a smaller scale we can look for more specific indications of this isolation - such as the types of room in which the figures are shown. On this level we find a number of plays in which the living-space, and not just its location, is a reflection of the figures' condition. For instance, the action of *Ein Fest für Boris* takes place in a room described in the stage-directions thus: "Leerer Raum. Hohe Fenster und Türen." (p.9) Höller feels that such a sparse setting

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[1] Thomas Bernhard, *Die Jagdgesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974).
[2] Thomas Bernhard *Immanuel Kant* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), stage direction, p.8.

focusses attention on "die Gute" as she sits in the middle of this empty space and that we then concentrate on what she says. '[20] To some extent this is true, but he misses the obvious fact that an empty room indicates above all isolation and loneliness - the central aspect of Bernhard's work. Gamper is rather more accurate than Höller when he observes that the empty space with high windows and doors is a metaphysical one which, combined with other dramatic elements, is a sign of the mental state of "die Gute." Thus Gamper:

> Szenenbeschreibung, szenisches Geschehen und Dialog des Beginns sind gehäufte Metaphern, die alle den Zustand des eingeschlossenen, aus jedem Sinnzusammenhang gerissenen Denkens signalisieren. Der "leere Raum," mit hohen Fenstern und Türen, ist ein metaphysischer Raum. '[21]

The emptiness of the room mirrors the emptiness of "die Gute's" existence; the high windows indicate the inescapability of this "prison" and, combined with the high doors, create an almost Gothic atmosphere of oppression - which, of course, is both projected by, and has its effect on, "die Gute". The total impression created by this setting and the events of the play is, as Hannemann observes, extremely grotesque. In the words of Hannemann:

> Mit einer ... drastischen Reduzierung des äusseren Reizbereichs wartet man ... in *Ein Fest für Boris* auf .... In diesem Stück ist die Bewegungslosigkeit mit der Monotonie und dem Wahnsinn aufs Groteskeste gekoppelt worden. '[22]

An important part of this observation is that of the

'[20] See Höller, *Kritik einer literarischen Form*, p.14.
'[21] Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.86.
'[22] Hannemann, p.86.

drastically reduced external attractions - the suffering and isolation we see in each play is bad enough, but we are also informed that the world beyond those walls is exactly the same, so that it is clear that the figures have no place of refuge or of relief. Again this is because the world is essentially a projection of the individual's state of mind and therefore, wherever that figure is, the world will look the same to him or her. This feature of the setting in *Ein Fest für Boris* is also seen in the interior settings of *Die Berühmten* ("Kalte weisse Halle" [123]), *Vor dem Ruhestand* ("Grosses Zimmer. Zwei hohe Fenster im Hintergrund" [124]) and *Am Ziel* ("Grosses Zimmer" [p.9]).

Concerning the metaphorical nature of the rooms we should recall the idea of the figures creating a larger space for themselves by way of their monologues. This motif is extended to the physical space around the figures, so that, on the one hand, these big empty rooms indicate isolation and loneliness, and on the other, they indicate the metaphorical projection of the individual beyond the body - in spite of their size the figures fill up and occupy the rooms with themselves. Of course these extended boundaries of the self are illusions projected by the figures and used to stave off the loneliness inherent in their existence. However, it is based on the same premise as the continual monologues and so is double-edged: It

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[123] Thomas Bernhard *Die Berühmten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976), p.9.
[124] Thomas Bernhard *Vor dem Ruhestand* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979), p.7.

reassures the figures on one level while confirming their worst fears on another - this latter level unfortunately being the one which is real and unavoidable and means that they are isolated and will die. This idea has been expressed by Jens Tismar thus:

> Auch in ihren Einsamkeitszellen sind diese Figuren (vor allem: psychischen) Verletzungen ausgesetzt. Indem der Wille zur individuellen Selbstbehauptung einen Ort sucht, wo sie noch möglich zu sein scheint, wird die Katastrophe deutlich, die aus der Vereinzelung entsteht. Thomas Bernhard zeigt ..., dass es keinen Ort gibt, wo man sich der psychischen und sozialen Entfremdung entziehen könnte. [125]

As Steinert points out the "Einsamkeitszelle" and the creation of the required "Freiraum" are inextricably linked, the former being a prerequisite for the latter. [126] Thus the figures are trapped - their "space" is really a prison. Or as Tismar says:

> Für die ... Hauptfiguren gibt es immer den doppelten Aspekt, die geschlossene Umgebung zu beurteilen: sie ist für sie Gefängnis und Zuflucht in einem. [127]

Although this is applicable to all the plays, only one, *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*, actually depicts the dual nature of the figures' abodes concretely. In this play a group of circus artists are seen attempting to perform a perfect rendition - under the duress of the ringmaster, Caribaldi, - of Schubert's *Forellenquintett* in a circus caravan. Even then the circus caravan seems intended as more of an element

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[125] Jens Tismar, *Gestörte Idyllen. Eine Studie zur Problematik der idyllischen Wunschvorstellungen am Beispiel von Jean Paul, Adalbert Stifter, Robert Walser und Thomas Bernhard* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1973), p.138.
[126] See Steinert, p.90.
[127] Tismar, p.108.

in the mockery of the pursuit of artistic perfection than a sign of (mental) confinement. However, Barthofer is still able to observe the connection between "space" and prison, and his observation hints at the figures' existential limbo. Thus Barthofer:

> Die Menschen in *Die Macht der Gewohnheit* sind ohne Bewegungsraum und Gefangene im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes. Sie haben keine Heimat und kein Zuhause (Wohnwagen). [12a]

The strength of the metaphor of the caravan lies in the contrast between its mobility, which leads to the image of travel and (literal and metaphorical) expanded horizons, and the crampedness of its interior, which reflects the figures' paralyzed minds. Despite their freedom to travel and the resulting potential relief to be derived from this activity they are in fact trapped, paradoxically, by their very means of mobility - the circus caravan. Bernhard shows here that even those figures who appear capable of escaping from his confined world are actually unable to do so. His world is shown to be inescapable and all-embracing, indicating how well-planned his concept and its depiction are.

So far I have discussed the information which can be found in the actual texts of the plays and have not considered the performance of these plays. [12b] One in particular is worthy of discussion here, that of *Der Präsident* in Munich in 1976. It has already been noted that the action of

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[12a] Barthofer, "Das Cello und die Peitsche," p.295.
[12b] For photographs of various (early) performances of the plays see Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, pp.193-200 and Michaelis, *Theater 1975. Sonderheft der Zeitschrift "Theater heute"/ Bilanz und Chronik der Saison 74/75*, pp.75-77.

this play takes place mainly in the Presidential palace, a place presumably inaccessible to the general populace. The stage-directions of the text state only that the action of the first two scenes takes place in the bedroom of the President and his wife, that there are two dressing tables and an empty dog-basket (p.9). The President's wife sits in front of one of the dressing tables preparing herself for the funeral of the officer who was killed in the assassination attempt on her husband. In itself it is significant that she is in front of a mirror because then, as Helmut Schödel observes, she can at least imagine to herself that her monologue is a dialogue as she talks to her reflection. [130] In the Munich production this motif of the mirror was extended to the whole building so that the figures were shown living in a glass palace, the glass walls also being mirrors inside the building - a symbol of the inward-looking characters who are isolated from, and are even unable to look out on, the outside world. Or in the words of Schödel:

> Dabei hatte Walter Dörfler immerhin mit jenem Glashaus, auf das mit Steinen geworfen wird, im Sinne Bernhards einen Raum der permanenten Gefährdung errichtet. Intelligent war das auch deshalb, weil Dörfler damit das Spiegelmotiv des Stücks ins Riesenhafte verzerrt hat. Denn diese Glaswände, die auch grosse Spiegel sind, verweisen nicht nur auf den Weltverlust der Figuren, auf die Objektlosigkeit ihrer Welt, sie helfen ihnen auch ihre Einsamkeit kompensieren. [131]

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[130] See Helmut Schödel, "Wunderschön hässlich: Thomas Bernhards *Der Präsident* in München," in *Theater heute* 17 (1976), p.56.
[131] ibid.

In contrast to *Der Präsident* is the explicit text of *Die Jagdgesellschaft*. The play is set in a hunting lodge in the middle of a large, diseased forest and the remoteness of the hunting lodge is of course symbolic of the isolation of the General, and of his wife too. In the performance of this play illustrated in Gamper's book on Bernhard this isolation is also revealed in a room highly reminiscent of that in which "die Gute" sits - oppressively high walls seem to bear down on the figures and emphasise their smallness in the scheme of things as much as their isolation. '[132] However in the text itself, the link is clearly made between the onset of the disease in the forest and the development of the General's cataracts. As Gamper says, the condition of the forest matches that of the General's way of thinking - both are old and undergoing a critical change which means their eventual destruction. '[133] The General's progressive loss of sight is indicative of a mental crisis in which he is no longer able to understand his life - i.e. "see" a reason for living. This parallel is constantly referred to by the author figure whose function it is towards the end of the play to explain obliquely what it is the General is experiencing and what it means. This "enlightenment" - i.e. the final understanding of his true position according to Bernhard's concepts - means that the General no longer has a reason for living, and so he shoots himself. To further enforce the metaphor of his condition and that of the

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[132] See Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.196.
[133] ibid. p.135.

forest, just after his death - which symbolises the death of his traditional way of thinking - the sound of saws and axes is heard, representing the beginning of the destruction of the diseased forest, which in its turn is also symbolic of the old, static thinking of the General. As can be seen, the structure and content of this play are closely linked and given full consideration by Bernhard, whereas in the production of *Der Präsident* it was the inventiveness of the director, Walter Dörfler, which brought out many of the structural possibilities of the play.

Recalling the description of the setting for *Die Berühmten* ("Kalte weisse Halle") we encounter yet another metaphor for the figures' condition - the cold. Not only are those high, bare walls barriers to contact between the individual and society (both in the sense of protection from and prevention of), they are also uninviting and cold, representing the individual's lack of warmth from human contact. The cold is also symbolic of man's frozen (paralyzed) mind. In the sense of isolation, however, "die Gute" in *Ein Fest für Boris* complains continually of being cold, and most explicitly in *Der Präsident* we find the phrase "zwischenmenschliche Eiseskälte" (p.137). Gamper notes that the frequent references to the cold in Bernhard's works are - like other metaphors in the plays - ambiguous. Discussing "die Gute" he says that her claims of feeling the cold have both a realistic base and a metaphorical significance: She is actually physically cold and her

complaints about this also serve as a distraction from the more serious coldness of her isolation and existence. Thus Gamper:

> Durch die Fiktion physisch zu frieren, lenkt sie sich ab von der seelischen, geistigen Kälte. Ihre Begründung ... ist doppeldeutig: sie ist möglich als realistische Motivation, im Rahmen der ablenkenden Fiktion physischer Kälte, und sie ist ebenso eine Umschreibung der metaphysischen Kälte als "Krankheit der Bewegunslosigkeit" (p.33.), die einschliesst: geistige Isolation. '[134]

Stictly speaking this is a thematic feature, but we can see that it is supported by the setting. Once again those high, bare walls reveal much about the condition of the characters who live inside them.

3.2.2 Physical and Mental Disabilities

However, as Barthofer points out, the symbolic setting is only part of the physical illustration of the individual's mental limitations, an equally important aspect is their actual physical immobility. '[135] Under the perspective of Bernhard's concepts we have seen that the continual verbal attempts at overcoming the insuperable barrier of communication are viewed as a form of madness or illness. It is not surprising then that this is given concrete form in the shape of physical or mental disabilities in the figures themselves. On the physical side we find that "die Gute" is a cripple; the father in *Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige* is almost blind, as are the General in *Die Jagdgesellschaft* and

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[134] ibid. p.86.
[135] See Barthofer, "Das Cello und die Peitsche," p.295.

Immanuel Kant; Caribaldi, the circus director in *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*, has a wooden leg; the "Weltverbesserer" is supposed to be a cripple too - although it seems as if this is an imaginary disability at one point (see p.88) - and Rudolf in *Vor dem Ruhestand* has a weak heart and eventually dies of a heart attack. On the mental side the doctor in *Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige*, Immanuel Kant and Voss, in *Ritter, Dene, Voss*, are all mad. [136]

As Gamper observes, there is a strong correlation between mental and physical immobility as shown in *Ein Fest für Boris*, [137] and the other forms of illness are equally indicative of the individual's isolation, but it is the symbolism of these cripples that is perhaps the most comprehensive and penetrating in Bernhard's work. Höller points out that the world outside her house is full of "Niederungen" for "die Gute" and is therefore something to be avoided for her ego's sake. The opposite is to be found in the world of the cripples' asylum: The inhabitants of this world are far worse off than she, in normal terms, and consequently she chooses to invite this world into her own home - hence their name for her, "die Gute." The exposé of the horrors of the asylum during the "Fest" reveal that instead of being an isolated case the problems of "die Gute"

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[136] Thomas Bernhard, *Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige*, 1972; *Der Weltverbesserer*, 1979; *Vor dem Ruhestand*, 1979; *Ritter, Dene, Voss*, 1984. All Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
[137] See Gamper: "Einerseits Wissenschaft, Kunststücke andererseits," p.19; and *Thomas Bernhard*, p.40.

are, in fact, widespread and thus take on a universal character. [38] The strength and implications of this comparison are heightened by the fact that the world of so-called goodness ("Haus der Guten") is shown to be just as sick and absurd as the world of the "Krüppelasyl." [39] As Jurgensen observes, in the "real" world the (mentally) sick individual ("das kranke Ich") ends up in the confinement of a mental asylum [40] - but Bernhard shows just such an individual not only as a member of "normal" society (although "die Gute" feels cut off from it), but as a respected member of that society too.

While the cripples of Bernhard's work serve to illustrate the sickness and stagnation of the thinking of his figures, the deranged figures illustrate the madness of continued existence in his world. If we remember that the problem with language in Bernhard's world is that it cannot convey truth, then we see that the madness of his characters is really an obsessive condition resulting directly from the realisation of their true existential position, a result of their "enlightenment" or their heightened awareness, and is not essentially a problem of language in itself. Rather, because of the nature of their insight the supposedly mad figures feel compelled to communicate their discovery, but their efforts are intensified to such a pitch that their

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[38] See Höller, "Die Form der Sprache," p.213. See also Margret Dietrich, *Das moderne Drama. Strömungen. Gestalten. Motive* (Stuttgart: Alfred Köner Verlag, 1974), p.646.
[39] See Barthofer, "The Plays," p.25.
[40] See Jurgensen, *Der Kegel im Wald*, p.38.

outpourings are perceived simply as gibberish by those around them and they are consequently classified as mad. This obsessiveness is misinterpreted by the other figures in this way because what comes through the flood of words is a falsification of the truth - indeed, of reality itself. Of course the fault here does not lie in the individual, but in the language he is forced to use. In this case madness is as much a reflection of language as of a mental condition because, although it is intended to be an aid communication, from Bernhard's point of view it is a hindrance to it. '*' Or in the words of Bernhard's Immanuel Kant:

> Das System ist ein falsches System
> das System ist immer ein falsches System (p.94)

Hartmut Zelinsky tries to draw a parallel on this level between Bernhard and Novalis. When we consider that for Novalis a heightened awareness and illness were necessarily connected, and that illness was actually a prerequisite for such a condition, as Zelinsky notes, there would appear to be some similarity in the works of these two authors. It is clear, however, that Bernhard has in fact turned Novalis' concept around so that the heightened awareness is shown to lead to the (mental) illness - or, to bring out the inherent paradox more clearly, the result of a moment of extreme insight into reality by the individual is a complete blurring of all subsequently expressed thoughts and the conviction in those around him that he has lost contact with what they see as reality. Therefore the madness of Bernhard's figures is

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'*' See Jurgensen, *Der Kegel im Wald*, p.12.

not to be interpreted as it would be in the "real" world. In his world it is a symptom and not a cause of the individual's problems.

3.2.3 Role-playing

Having looked at some of the figures' disabilities which prevent them from functioning in society we can now look at the types of social activity given to the other figures, such as their jobs or professions, to see how Bernhard reflects isolation in these. Many of the figures in the plays are identified with a specific role which requires certain expectations to be fulfilled and their behaviour can then be seen as a form of role-playing. Jürgen Sang has approached this problem as a general feature of contemporary literature in his book *Reflektierte Rollenspiele*. In his conclusion he defines four features of role-playing, two of which are relevant here. Both of them have to do with the use of role-playing by the individual to protect himself from what can be seen as a personal threat. The first deals with the adoption of a role to compensate for a loss of personal identity in which the playing of a certain role with easily identifiable characteristics is seen to allow the individual to give himself a socially acceptable persona which then masks the sense of personal identity loss. '[42] The second definition deals more specifically with the adoption of a role to protect oneself from the pressures of

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'[42] See Sang, p.115, (no.3).

society and is particularly relevant to Bernhard's plays because of the existential fear haunting his central characters:

> Rollenspiele geben Formen der Selbsttäuschung von Personen zu bedenken, die ... existentiellen Schutz vor gesellschaftlichen Zwängen suchen, in Doppelleben fliehen, sich verstecken oder sich durch eine künstliche Sprache und Schweigen eine überlegene Identität aufzubauen suchen. '[43]

Whilst to a large extent it is true that they have turned to role-playing as a form of personal compensation and as a refuge from their existential fear, it is more important that in Bernhard's plays these roles are seen to lead directly to isolation in that they require the individual to be generally inaccessible to the rest of society. In this respect the classes of role in these plays fall into two groups: The first is a political one as illustrated by the General and the President as leaders of their respective societies, and Rudolf, in *Vor dem Ruhestand*, as an upholder of society's justice as a "Gerichtspräsident" with all the attendant public responsibilities that that entails. '[44] The second group is that of the artist, and in particular of those performing artists who have become identified with a specific role. Into this category fall Moritz Meister, who is completely obsessed with his alter ego, Professor Stieglitz; the bass-singing baron in *Die Berühmten*, who has sung the part of the Ox in Richard Strauss' *Der*

'[43] ibid. (no.4.).

'[44] This responsible position is tainted, however, by the fact that Rudolf is an ex-Nazi who still celebrates Himmler's birthday - the occasion of the play - and by the insinuation of incest as part of these celebrations.

Rosenkavalier over two hundred times; and the soprano in *Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige*, who has become so identified with her role in Mozart's *Zauberflöte* that she is known simply as "die Königin der Nacht." [45] It is important to realise that all of these figures are active in specific social categories which demand certain patterns of behaviour and are, therefore, evidence of channelled or limited thinking and do not allow for any break in those patterns. Consequently this means that these figures are trapped in a confined world of their own - as confirmed by the monologues - and are, as Barthofer says, "compelled to an empty, meaningless existence." [46]

Clear evidence of this unpleasant twist is to be found in the figure of "die Königin der Nacht." The role of the "Königin" in Bernhard's play is an allegorical one which reveals the singer's isolation and "eingeschlossenes Denken." [47] Her recourse to this role to cover her existential fear has become a trap so that she is now dependent on it for the continuation of her existence as it has now become her "real" identity. She has developed her art to an extreme level - her sustained perfection in the role leads the Doctor to call her a "Koloraturmaschine" - in order to compensate for her artistic insecurity. But now she must pay

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[45] It is also possible to include Caribaldi in *Die Macht der Gewohnheit* here as he has been completely taken over by his obsessive and futile pursuit of a perfect rendition of the *Forellenquintett*, a pursuit which seems to have become his life's aim - and which, of course, means that his life is futile as he cannot possibly attain his goal.
[46] Barthofer, "The Plays," p.37.
[47] Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.101.

for this in the subsequent isolation of being a "star." More than this, however, she is now dependent on the goodwill of her audience to help maintain the illusion of having overcome this insecurity because this depends on her continued success in the public eye. Or as Gamper says:

> Jetzt wo sie am Ziel ist, wiederholt sich der Mechanismus ...: durch die "allerhöchsten Ansprüche" (81), welche die Königin an sich selber stellt, behauptet sie sich gegen das Publikum, indem sie seine Rücksichtslosigkeit (81), seine Ansprüche auf Perfektion, sich zu eigen macht (verinnerlicht). Als von der Gesellschaft "vollkommen abgeschlossen" (17), ist sie ihr, als dem Publikum, so unbedingt ausgeliefert wie nie zuvor. '[42]

Without the role which she has slipped into she has nothing to live for. Although she suffers from her present existence she must go on living (playing) it or succumb to the fears which haunt her, and die. This is, in fact, what happens. Under provocation from the Doctor she gives up her career and is subsequently unable to face the alternative existence which awaits her. She is as crippled as Bernhard's physically handicapped figures because she suffers from the same existential "Bewegungslosigkeit" as they all do. '[43]

3.3 Summary

Indeed, "Bewegungslosigkeit" and the related problem of isolation are the dominant features of Bernhard's plays and are depicted as much in the dramatic form as in the structure of the monologues. In both instances it becomes clear that any attempt to express oneself outside the bounds

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'[42] ibid. p.103.
'[43] ibid. p.153.

permitted by a society supremely fearful of death is seen as an expression of madness (or illness). '[88] This of course refers specifically to the attempts to confront society with its own pretensions and its ultimate futility, and above all by attempting to confront it with the idea of the inescapability and omnipresence of death which causes this futility. However, Bernhard's figures are possessed by this one idea (whether they recognise it or not) and, because society refuses to accept it, they are doomed to suffer either publicly in - but still cut off from - an insensitive, wilfully ignorant society, trying to suppress their knowledge; or privately in their own, lonely world which is dominated by their "madness." This madness takes the form of a neverending search for the individual's identity in relation to death and is the single-minded mania filling the void of their isolated existences - and, ironically, is the cause of the heightened awareness of this isolation. As we have seen it is revealed in the mental and physical isolation evident in the monologues, the settings of the plays, and the metaphorical mental and physical disabilities of the figures.

'[88] See Jurgensen, *Der Kegel im Wald*, p.47.

4. Conclusion

In summing up his study of Bernhard, Brettschneider comments on what he calls the "verbissene Konsequenz" of Bernhard's work, a feature which he feels separates him from almost all other contemporary authors. [151] As can be seen from both the monologues and the dramatic form "grim consistency" is, indeed, a suitable epithet to describe this product, to which we could add a further term "engineered sterility." The important point to note, however, is that the grimness and sterility of these plays is derived essentially from the structure of the language which, because of its circular - if not static - and highly repetitive form does not allow - indeed, is actually intended to prevent - the development of plot, character and genuine dialogue. Because Bernhard, the playwright, rejects in this way those features which are the essence of drama - real conflicts or the inter-action of his figures - it is possible to claim, as Gamper has done, that he is, in fact, a "Theaterzerstörer," just as Bernhard, the prose-writer, is a "Geschichtenzerstörer." [152]

It is obvious that this destructive tendency is not a result of Bernhard's being simply unable to write, but is the result of a choice of a particular writing style. In this respect A.P. Dierick feels that Bernhard is able to reach his pessimistic and nihilistic conclusions only by

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[151] See Brettschneider, p.190.
[152] See Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.152. The term "Geschichtenzerstörer" was formulated by Bernhard himself in the interview *Drei Tage*. See *Der Italiener*, p.152.

means of this particular style. He says that:

> a frequent use of a "narrow vision" associated with psychologically unbalanced narrators, the introduction of grotesque elements and the use of a disturbing vocabulary and syntax may well create a feeling in the reader, at first difficult to formulate, that the nihilistic "message" results rather more from Bernhard's narrative and verbal skills than from acute observation and analysis. [153]

This is an accurate but superficial observation as it fails to take into account the concept behind Bernhard's writing, for he writes strictly according to those tenets established in the speeches given on the reception of various literary prizes, discussed earlier, and which are to be seen as the basis of his literary programme.

Proof that Bernhard is writing to such a plan can be found in the fact that he has completely disassociated himself from all of his early journalistic writings, and from his early poetry, short stories and unpublished plays written before 1960. According to Jens Dittmar, Bernhard maintains that "only his works after 1963 have any merit, and (he) refuses to reprint earlier works." [154] Confirmation of this and the corresponding adherence to a strictly defined literary programme, which appears to have been developed during the '50's and early '60's, is to be found in the fact that since the publication of Bernhard's first novel, *Frost*, in 1963, the grammatical form and central

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[153] A.P.Dierick, "Thomas Bernhard's Austria: Symbol, Neurosis or Expedient?" in *Modern Austrian Literature*, Vol.12, No.12 (1979) pp.73-94, p.73.
[154] Jens Dittmar, "*Die verrückte Magdalena* - an early short story by Thomas Bernhard," in *German Life and Letters*, Vol.35, No.3 (1982), pp.267-271, p.267.

concerns of his output have hardly altered, if at all, '[155]' indicating that this is the literary style for which he wishes to be known. It is as if he had created a personal literary trademark for himself.

The fact that Bernhard has used this same literary method for all of his plays led Martin Esslin to suggest that Bernhard is indulging in a form of mannerism. He defines mannerism as the predominance of technique over content, in which "how" becomes more important than "what." Thus Esslin:

> Worum es im Manierismus offensichtlich geht, ist der Primat des "wie" über das "was": nicht **was** dargestellt wird ist wichtig, sondern die Virtuosität der Art **wie** es dargestellt wird, bis zu dem Grad wo die **Technik** der Darstellung sich verselbständigt und selbst **Gegenstand** der Darstellung wird. Dabei verflüchtigt sich auch der letzte Rest des **signifié**, die **signifiants** werden zum Selbstzweck. '[156]'

This predominance of form over content is obviously the case with Bernhard.

As far as drama is concerned, this means that it is no longer simply a literary genre, but in its very form is a physical presentation of an idea ("dargestellte Idee") - the form is the idea. '[157]' Therefore to say, as Hannemann does, that Bernhard "sentences" his figures to their (prison-like) situations and does not allow them any alternatives, '[158]' is mistakenly to imply that these figures are "real" and are

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'[155]' See Höller, *Kritik einer literarischen Form*, p.1.
'[156]' Martin Esslin, "Ein neuer Manierismus? Randbemerkungen zu einigen Werken von Gert F. Jonke und Thomas Bernhard," in *Modern Austrian Literature*, Vol.13, No.1 (1980) pp.111-128, p.111.
'[157]' See Jurgensen, *Der Kegel im Wald*, p.37.
'[158]' See Hannemann, p.128.

made to behave unrealistically (i.e. are manipulated) by the author. Traditionally speaking this might be so but we must approach this material in a different light: Bernhard's figures are merely "verkörperte Funktionen", used to illustrate the concept which generates them - what they are and what they say is entirely subordinated to the concept of the whole, they are instruments in a performance and exposition of an idea - a metaphor given concrete form in the figures and instruments of *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*. '[59]'

This idea seems to be both nihilistic and very persistent; but this very persistency leads one to suspect the validity and seriousness of the idea. In this respect Wolfschütz says the reader ultimately realizes that:

> Bernhard's preoccupation with death is a pose in which he plays the part of the poet of death, transcending mundane social and political considerations to draw hidden treasures of truths from the shadows for all to experience. His relationship to the literary tradition, his life and work, are first and last a game played at the edge of the abyss, a game which not only reflects the loss of any objective value-system, but also the demise of that modernist view which sees the artist as the interpreter and sooth-sayer of a disjointed and fragmented world. '[60]'

This analysis would seem to place Bernhard firmly into the movement loosely described as post-modernism, one of whose features is the break with the traditional conventions of literary form, in particular the adoption, in the novel, of the style known as metafiction in which the conventions of narrative form are made the narrative's focal subject. '[61]'

'[59]' See Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.82.
'[60]' Wolfschütz, p.230.
'[61]' For the strength of post-modernist trends in

Once it is accepted that the structure is more important than the content we can see that the nihilism of Bernhard's work is hard to take seriously. This is especially so when one considers the ironies surrounding his work, particularly his plays. These ironies, some of which seem as intentional as the static form of the monologues, soften the harsh impressions of grimness and gloom which Bernhard goes to such lengths to create, so much so, in fact, that one begins to question both the purpose behind the plays and their seriousness.

The irony and humour in Bernhard's plays function on several different levels: It might be self-standing or it might arise from reference to an aspect of Bernhard's total concept and therefore reaches beyond the confines of the play itself and can only be appreciated fully when seen as a cross-reference, or it might even be self-irony on Bernhard's part.

First of all then, I shall look at the elements of self-irony to be found in the plays. Not surprisingly the plays which contain these elements are the later ones: This is because Bernhard had to establish a body of his own work to which he could refer and, more importantly, he had to have some public reaction against which he could ironise. Therefore, although he had been what appeared (ironically)

''(cont'd) contemporary German literature see the essay by Robert Pynsent, "Contemporary German Fiction: The Dimensions of Experimentation," in *The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature* ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Prometheus Books, 1982), pp.284-303 (on Bernhard: pp.289-291.).

sharply critical - blatantly provocative is perhaps more accurate - of the world of performing artists and their audience in *Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige* and *Die Berühmten*, it was not until the play *Immanuel Kant* that he can be said to refer to his own work. In this play the title character is not the Kant of historical fame but a madman who is celebrated as a great philosopher and who is on his way to America to have his eyes operated on. Yet when he arrives in New York, instead of being met by doctors who are to operate on his failing eyes as expected, he is met by doctors from a mental hospital who take him away to their asylum. Kant's final line - "Sie haben mich erkannt" (p.133) - is therefore loaded with irony and ambiguity. And in *Der Weltverbesserer* the title figure is celebrated for his treatise on the improvement of the world, but as he himself tells us he seems to have been badly misunderstood because his plans call for the destruction of the world before it can be improved. As can be seen there appears to be a strong element of self-irony in these two plays. Both figures are misunderstood in a similar way to which Bernhard has been generally misunderstood, but in reverse: Whereas Kant is mad, Bernhard is not, and although the "Weltverbesserer" calls for the destruction of the world, Bernhard does not; however, these are similar to accusations which have been levelled at Bernhard himself and what better way to mock his accusers than to write more plays generated by their accusations, and thus further increase his literary fame?

The title of the play *Der Schein trügt* can also be seen as evidence of his sense of having been misinterpreted, although, of course, he probably wanted this to happen in the first place as it would seem to be a vital part of the whole concept. Further (self-)irony is to be found in the titles of the plays *Vor dem Ruhestand*, *Am Ziel* and *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*. In the light of Bernhard's basic concept of continually struggling against fear and despair these titles are obviously ironic because it simply is not possible to reach one's goal, nor is there any respite from the torments of life in his world - and none is shown in these plays. '[62]

Considering the grimness of the plays, which is quite real in itself and is engineered to be so by the contolled use of language, the presence of humorous elements, or even comedy, might appear to be quite limited. To some extent this is so, but although the quantity of these elements is small, it is their quality and actual presence which is important and which reflects the humour behind the whole play complex. By reducing the number of humorous elements Bernhard actually stresses their importance and meaning because they stand out so much against the background of gloom in which they are set. However, there are occasions

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'[62] The irony of his titles is evident in the prose-work too. For instance, the unusually positive title of the novel *Ja* is left unexplained until the last few lines when it is revealed that this was the answer given by a now dead woman, whose recent suicide is the inspiration for the content of the book, to the question as to whether she would ever contemplate taking her own life. See Wolfschütz, p.229.

when the grimness of the plays pushes the humour into the realm of the absurd. There is a strong element of the absurd, for instance, in the situation of *Ein Fest für Boris*. In this play the celebration of Boris' birthday (which ends with his death) is attended by a group of cripples, who are former co-inmates of his in the nearby asylum, largely to placate the conscience of the tyrant who "rescued" him and who now subjects him to the vagaries of her will and megalomania, and who is yet known as "die Gute." But perhaps the one play which really captures the absurdity behind them all - but which some critics feel goes too far in this direction '[63] - is *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*. The basic situation of this play is obviously ridiculous - a group of circus artists attempting a perfect rendition of Schubert's *Forellenquintett* in a circus caravan - and the possibilities of the situation are played out to the full. Therefore we have the ever-hopeful, but desperately resigned, phrase "Morgen in Augsburg" recurring throughout, plus the slapstick of the clown's hat continually falling off and the forcing of the lion-tamer to play the piano with bandaged hands after having been mauled by his animals. As Gamper and Mennemeier note, the presence of so many humorous elements weakens the horror effect of the play '[64], but these critics do not realise that it purposely carries the mood of the play into the sphere of the absurd.

'[63] See, for example, Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.160, and Mennemeier, pp.319-320.
'[64] ibid.

However, the most obvious irony - and one which encompasses the whole of his work - is that Bernhard appears to be capable of communicating the incommunicable. As Schmidt-Dengler notes, Bernhard constantly denies the possibility of communication in his works, and yet he publishes "in steter Folge." [65] This would seem to indicate that he is communicating to (at least some of) his readers (and audience) on some level or other, otherwise he would have been rejected long ago. Indeed, it would appear that even in the case of Bernhard there is a relatively large number of people who find him interesting because his experiences match their own. [66] Whether he cares to acknowledge it or not he does have an effect on his public. However, this potential for understanding and the affinity with the "message" of his work felt by some readers is actually built-in by Bernhard and is necessary for the purpose of his writing, indeed of his total concept - which extends beyond the statements in his speeches and publications - to be fully appreciated.

Regarding the irony of Bernhard's prolific (and commercially successful) output Michaelis pinpoints the paradox at its heart when he observes that it is Bernhard's control of language which allows him to be actually saying nothing of any real consequence whilst speaking continuously. Thus Michaelis:

Der Fall ist Paradox: Ein - wortmächtiger -

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[65] See Schmidt-Dengler, p.74.
[66] See Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, pp.8-9.

> Sprachloser, der nach dem Urteil der "Welt" bei "nie zu bremsenden Sprechdurchfall" die Kunst beherrscht, "ununterbrochen nichts zu sagen," erobert die Sprechbühne. '[6]

As we have seen, simply by using language at all Bernhard inevitably conveys some meaning and yet the intention is expressly to destroy this meaning. In this respect Wolfschütz points out that "there is little place for the referential element in language in the systematic abstraction to which Bernhard's absolutism leads" and, because language by its very nature is a sign and signifier, "it is an ideal ... which can never be wholly attained." '[8] That is to say that Bernhard, if he is really serious about his concepts, is fighting a losing battle, one which he could never hope to win from the start. As a result, seemingly to avoid accusations of having developed and staked his career on a faulty concept, he has overlaid his work with the same conceit of existential necessity which he gives his monomanic figures. '[9] But, as Mennemeier notes,

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'[6] Michaelis, "Verstörung durch Totentänze," p.75.
'[8] Wolfschütz, p.223.
'[9] See the autobiographical work *Der Keller*: "Nur weil ich mich gegen mich stelle und tatsächlich immer gegen mich bin, bin ich befähigt, zu sein." *Der Keller. Eine Entziehung* (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 1976), p.150. However, despite the grim terms in which he phrases it, it is clear that Bernhard chose to write rather than follow any other profession as he cryptically admits in *Drei Tage*: "Ich hätte ja etwas ganz anderes machen können. Ich hab' sehr viel andere Disziplinen gelernt ..., ich hab' sehr früh Zeichenunterricht genommen, und ich wär' wahrscheinlich ein mittelmässiger Zeichner geworden .... Ich hab' Musik studiert .... Ich hab' eine Zeit gehabt, wo ich gedacht hab', ich werd' unbedingt ein Kapellmeister werden .... Dann hätt' ich Schauspieler werden können oder Regisseur oder Dramaturg .... Und wahrscheinlich ... warum bin ich eigentlich zum Schreiben gekommen, warum schreibe ich Bücher? **Aus Opposition gegen mich selbst plötzlich**, und

despite this apparent life-sustaining motivation, the results of the effort involved in such an artistic and psychological endeavour seem to fall short of our expectations and reveal that "Bernhard ist ein in seine Leiden tief verstrickter Ironiker." [170] The reasons for this can be found in the irony of what Jurgensen calls "das dargestellte Verhältnis des Unverhältnismässigen," or the absurdity which he feels is the heart of Bernhard's humour, and which we have seen to be quite intense.

Absurd is perhaps the best way to describe the whole complex of Bernhard's work. In this respect Esslin feels that the public is being confronted with a mass of horror which it believes is a reflection of itself and, because it is inclined to take such things seriously, ignores the possibility of irony and is blissfully unaware of the joke being played on it. Thus Esslin:

> Bernhards Dramatik scheint mir in mancher Hinsicht ein Ausdruck einer "saeva indignatio" diesem Publikum gegenüber, die Häufung von Horror in seinen Stücken eine Form von ironisch-bitterer Aggression, gegen dieses Publikum, das gerade deshalb, weil es geneigt sein dürfte, alle Schrecken tiefernst als tragisch zu empfinden, mit kaltem Hohn überschüttet wird - ohne das natürlich selbst zu merken. [171]

From this perspective it seems that Bernhard goes to great lengths to create a performance of such stunning grimness that the members of the audience will be left at

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[169](cont'd) gegen diesen Zustand ... Ich wollte eben diesen ungeheuren Widerstand, und dadurch schreibe ich Prosa." *Der Italiener*, pp.154-155.

[170] Mennemeier, p.307.

[171] Esslin, p.125.

the end "wie erschlagen," and "reglos in ihren Sesseln,"[172] while he sits watching them, laughing at their failure to see the deception being played on them. Consequently these plays are not plays in the usual sense, but what Gamper calls "Theatertheater" [173] in which the whole process of a dramatic performance is the actual subject of the play, and in which the conventions and artificiality of such a performance are laid bare for examination. Only when we distance ourselves from Bernhard's texts can we see the whole process of theatricality revealed in action: Bernhard plays out the "game" so consistently and successfully that we must do this to see the whole process from start to finish - from the commencement of writing, through the actors' rehearsals, to the actual performance - which includes the proceedure of people buying tickets and going to the theatre, etc. - and beyond, to the critical response to this performance. All of this becomes the subject of Bernhard's plays, not just what is printed in the text. It is as if he has taken the metafiction of his prose and put it on the stage - what we might call "metadrama." Therefore each of his plays is as much of an "Unterhaltungsmechanismus" [174] as a traditional one, in the same way that a metafictional novel can be as entertaining as a traditional novel. For this reason every example of his literary output - not just his plays - becomes a "tour de force" in that we

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[172] Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.151.
[173] ibid.
[174] ibid.

are meant to admire the style and technique rather than the content, because this has been made secondary and is now only a vehicle for the masterful display of controlled writing.

As can be seen, the absurd is a way of going beyond the initial horror and that, therefore, it is a device to distance the audience from that horror. Clearly Bernhard includes it so that his plays are given this different perspective and are no longer the central concern but a path to this. The complex theatricality involved in such a concept is illustrated in the play *Minetti* which was written to be performed by the actor Bernhard Minetti who has become closely associated with Bernhard's leading roles. Therefore we have a play about a retired actor, who like Bernhard's Kant is not supposed to be identified with the real person of that name, but in the case of Minetti is intended to be played by that real person. More than this, though, the character Minetti has been duped into attending a non-existent meeting at which he was to discuss his return to the stage, but of course he is on stage all the time. These conceptual twists occur on so many levels in this play that one has to step back and take note of them before dealing with the (secondary) content of the text itself. The same applies to Bernhard's work as a whole.

As one would begin to expect from this state of affairs, Bernhard appears to be in total control of what he does. This includes his behaviour as a controversial author:

In order to play out the role assigned to himself he even appears to live a similar existence to the one he gives his figures. In the speech he gave upon reception of the Austrian State Prize in 1968, Bernhard stated that all thinking was, in effect, "second-hand" and, as Wolfschütz observes, he must have included thinking and speaking about death in this too. This means that we speak in inverted commas, always quoting others, never able to generate anything new, and are forced to play a role in which we are expected to say certain pre-established things approved by society as "safe" and acceptable - which of course rules out talking about death or similar unpleasant, but inevitable facts of life - so that consequently everything about our behaviour and lives becomes theatrical. Wolfschütz feels that this is reinforced by Bernhard in the way he chooses to live and operate as a writer. Therefore Wolfschütz says that he

> sees speaking as a form of speaking in inverted commas, a form of role-playing within a carefully-set theatre, and he includes both his own work and his own public image in this definition. By choosing to live in the solitude of an out-of-the-way farm he not merely reflects the isolation of his characters, but his infrequent public appearances to receive prizes or to give interviews show him obsessed with death and apparently unable to talk about anything else. It is as if he were constantly quoting from his own work. ''[3]

Therefore, not only is his writing a balancing act ''[4] - the playing-off of content, structure and public reception against each other - but his life appears to be one too as

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''[3] Wolfschütz, p.228.
''[4] See Jurgensen, *Der Kegel im Wald*, p.24.

he tries to give his writing's central concept credibility by living it out himself.

However, this is still not to say that we should take him seriously as a messenger of death, even at this point. As Dierick observes, the mannerism involved in Bernhard's work casts doubts on the "felicity or even the validity" of his nihilism, and consequently on the motivation behind the statements which create this sense of gloom. Dierick suggests, but does not commit himself to, the conclusion that all this is little more than "the exploitation of a fashionable stance in order to sell the person Bernhard." [17] Dierick seems unwilling to commit himself to this assessment of egotism on the part of Bernhard because this is to go against the apparent seriousness and intellectualisation of his work. But as we have seen the artistic seriousness of the plays is somewhat suspect, and therefore it does not seem too arrogant or misguided to ascribe such a motive to Bernhard. After all, he has to make a living somehow and there is no reason why he should not exploit his own talents as a showman to promote his talents as a writer; and we must remember that it is these writing talents which enable him to "perform" as he does - without this solid base the rest collapses.

Steinert, on the other hand, is not as reluctant as Dierick to ascribe egotism to Bernhard and notes that ever since the controversy surrounding the speech for the

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[17] Dierick, p.74.

Austrian State Prize he has been in the (literary) public eye, and has seemed to take an active role in the promotion of himself as a controversial figure. Thus Steinert:

> Fortan galt der zurückgezogen lebende Bernhard im literarischen "Schaugeschäft," das er zwar immer wieder wortstark kritisierte, in dem er aber - paradoxerweise - gerade durch seine provozierenden, oft herb-clownesken Auftritte eine aktive Rolle einnahm, als "enfant terrible." [17]

Just as the monologues in Bernhard's plays are carefully structured and engineered to destroy communication, so the presentation of the literary persona, Bernhard, is engineered to maintain a high profile, which can only benefit him and his publishers. [18] Obviously this self-marketing can be successful only if it is recognised that Bernhard can write and if he chooses material that is both controversial and exploitable (i.e. popular). For this reason we can see why the themes of death and isolation form the core of his concept - they are undeniably fashionable and exploitable in the 20th Century. [19] Thus, despite the resentment and scorn which might be felt by some critics at the apparent joke being played on the public, it is to

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[17] Steinert, p.27.

[18] See, for instance, the article by Michaelis in *Die Zeit* of September 5, 1975, who "at least hints at this possibility" (Dierick, p.74.) when he says: "Es wird an Stimmen nicht fehlen, die Bernhard ausser seiner Begabung zum Schreiben ein Talent zum publikumswirksamer Vermarktung der eigenen Person und seiner Werke bescheinigen. Denn erlebt dieser - scheue - Autor zur Zeit nicht eine fast unheimliche Konjunktur?"

[19] See Dierick, p.74, and Steinert, p.19. Steinert also says that Bernhard makes use of the literary motif of isolation which is the trademark of the movement known as "Neue Innerlichkeit" or "Neue Subjektivität," which is currently enjoying considerable critical interest. See Steinert, p.92.

Bernhard's credit and a testimony to his writing skills that he can still be read and (mis-)interpreted on several levels and be a success in the literary world which he continually derides, but of which he clearly wants to be a celebrated part.

It still remains to be discussed why Bernhard turned to writing drama so wholeheartedly after having established himself as a successful prose-writer. If it was to arouse more interest in (and criticism of) his work then there can be no doubt that he has succeeded in this. As Zdenko Škreb pointed out at the Bonn Symposium on Austrian Literature in November, 1980, theatre critics did not spare the dramatist any more than literary critics spared the prose-writer. Indeed, as the two examples quoted by Škreb show, the reactions to the drama are reminiscent of some of the early ones towards his prose. [*1] For instance, Joachim Kaiser complained of the repetition in the plays and Friedrich Abendroth spoke of Bernhard's self-deception ("Selbsttäuschung") of being a dramatist. [*2] However, despite this negative critical reception, Bernhard has continued undaunted and even since Abendroth's criticism of his abilities as a playwright (1979) he has published a further five plays. Naturally, critical and public reception of a play can differ vastly, and this is definitely the case with Bernhard. As if to snub the critics these plays are (or

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[*1] See Škreb, p.160.

[*2] Joachim Kaiser, article in *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 8/6/76, and Friedrich Abendroth, article in *Die Wiener Presse*, 4/7/79, both quoted in Škreb, p.160.

have been so far) very successful in performance. '[83] Rather than contradict Abendroth's accusation - which would appear to be based mainly on what Kesting would see as a failure to deal with the work on its own terms instead of the critic's (perhaps) "normal" terms - Jürgen Wallmann feels that the popular success of what he prefers to call Bernhard's "weak libretti," rather than proper plays, has more to do with careful staging and promotion so that each performance has become more of an "event" than an artistic experience. Thus Wallmann:

> Wenn in jüngster Zeit von Thomas Bernhard die Rede war, dann meinte man meist den Theaterautor, den ungemein fruchtbaren und erfolgreichen Verfasser von Stücken, die, wie mir scheint, wohl eher schwächere Libretti sind, die aber dank geschickter Regie, bewundernswerter Schauspielkunst und eines cleveren Managements, zu sogenannten Theaterereignissen wurden. '[84]

Recalling the inventive stage-design of the Munich production of *Der Präsident* in 1976, we can see that this is correct when applied to the plays themselves, and, in the light of his infrequent but controversial public appearances, to Bernhard the showman, and even to Suhrkamp's publicity department which seems to help him maintain the required profile. In this respect we must not forget the financial aspects of this success which, whilst perhaps not the original motivation for Bernhard's writing must now be seen to play a considerable part in both his and Suhrkamp's undertakings. Sorg takes this into account, too, when he

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'[83] See Barthofer, p.21.

'[84] Jürgen P. Wallmann, "Thomas Bernhard: Die Erzählungen," in *Literatur und Kritik*, 143 (1980), pp.186-187, p.186.

suggests that drama now seems to have acquired the same significance as prose as an irritant for Bernhard. Thus Sorg:

> (die Bühnenwerke) deuten die Möglichkeit an, dass nun auch das Schreiben fürs Theater von jenem "Widerstand" angeleitet und vorangetrieben wird, den Bernhard als Antrieb seiner Arbeit unabdingbar braucht (*Drei Tage*, p.149f.) - von den kommerziellen Erwägungen einmal ganz abgesehen. '**

This irritant factor may well be present, but our acceptance of this depends largely on how seriously we take the original claim of existential need on the part of Bernhard.

In contrast to Sorg's suggestion is the statement made by Gamper that Bernhard writes his plays very quickly and as a form of relaxation, whereas he can take years to complete a prose-work. '** Considering that he has continued to produce a prolific amount of prose since 1970 (the year *Ein Fest für Boris* was published) - at least 14 publications by the end of 1984 - it may well be true that the plays act as a diversion from his primary activity. However, this is to ignore the difference between the emotional impact a play has on an audience and that which a book has on a single reader.

In this respect, Škreb says that the reason why Bernhard has continued his production of drama would seem to lie in the immediacy of the genre which must appeal to him because he no longer has to worry about the problems of narrative perspective - although he would appear to have

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'** Sorg, p.189.
'** See Gamper, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.80.

mastered these in his prose - and consequently the themes of death and isolation are far stronger and more immediate as they are brought to life on the stage by the actors. Thus Škreb:

> keine Brechung der Erzählperspektive wie in der Erzählung ist hier notwendig, der Dichter erteilt das Wort den mit Fleisch und Blut versehenen auftretenden Menschen, er lässt sie vor die Zuschauer hintreten und braucht keine Gewähr für sie zu übernehmen: er braucht vom Tod nicht zu erzählen, sie stellen den Tod leibhaft dar. '*'

This brings us back to a major aspect of Bernhard's concept - that of continually confronting people with the inescapable fact of death. The shock effect of such a "life-like" encounter through a play must be that much greater than that through a book. Of course the audience is also aware that it is only a performance by actors so the effect is still not as strong as the "real thing," but at least, theoretically,it confronts the audience more directly than is possible through a book. In addition we can include the obvious aspect of the sheer theatricality of Bernhard's total performance - what better way to illustrate this than in having people go through the rituals of theatre-going to witness a production which is ultimately based on their behaviour in this regard?

It is clear, then, that when we discuss Bernhard's work we are discussing a very complex and extremely well thought-out concept of total art. How well thoughtout it is can be appreciated only when we take into account the whole

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'*' Škreb, p.161.

process which begins with the inception of each play and does not end until its last performance or the last piece of criticism has been published - for critics are as much a part of the show as anyone else. Of course none of this is possible unless the writing itself is of a sufficiently high quality. It is fair to say that with few exceptions critics are generally agreed that he can write, but even then many also feel that he writes himself into a corner. In this respect Reich-Ranicki observed relatively early that the effectiveness of Bernhard's writing lies in its controlled ability to create a sense of monotony, but that this monotony also threatens his work because its limits are too narrow. '[*] In similar vein Schmidt-Dengler feels that the intense introversion and limited scope of Bernhard's world causes a break in the emotional identification between him and his readers - whom he needs for his work to be effective. Thus Schmidt-Dengler:

> In dieser Welt gibt es keine Veränderung, sie lässt keine zu. Von Werk zu Werk mehr schliesst sich Bernhard selbst ein, er mauert sich in seiner Sprache ein und verweigert sich seinen Lesern. '[**]

As we might expect, this limited range can lead to some negative conclusions about Bernhard. Knapp has gone so far as to suggest that he might be one of the most over-rated writers in contemporary literature '[***], which might well be true as only time will tell if his work is of any genuine, lasting value or whether interest in him is merely a passing

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'[*] See Reich-Ranicki, p.94.
'[**] Schmidt-Dengler, p.74.
'[***] See Knapp, "Review," p.77.

fad. Naturally this is a problem inherent in the study and assessment of any living writer, especially one whose interest is essentially a popular and therefore possibly ephemeral one. In this respect Karol Sauerland has said that it will be left to literary historians to save Bernhard's reputation, both as a prose-writer and a dramatist. '[1]

Of course popularity is no way to gauge a writer's quality or value and we must not forget that it was Bernhard's writing ability, his ability to create the atmosphere he wanted, that got him noticed originally - it was only through the scandal of his public appearances that his high profile was established and that he became a highly sought-after literary "personality." His popularity would appear to rest on this scandalous image because as a writer he is relatively inaccessible, in that his prose and plays are far from commercial (in the sense of popular entertainment) and are actually almost pretentiously literary and subjective. As Barhofer says, Bernhard "is not a typical representative of the thinking of his generation, nor do his plays fit easily into commonly accepted categories of literary classification." '[2] Consequently our opinion of his status as a writer depends largely on whether we take the content of his work seriously or whether we see it as a means to an end. Or as Dierick says:

> Formulated tersely, Bernhard's status as a writer would depend on whether one considers him as a literary figure excelling in brilliant but

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'[1] See Sauerland, p.351.
'[2] Barthofer, "The Plays," p.46.

> destructive artistry using nihilism as an expedient, or as a true nihilist who bases his beliefs on valid data about the world surrounding him. "Poseur or Nihilist," this seems to be the basic question in the task of evaluating Bernhard's writings. '[3]

Naturally such questions cannot be answered unless the relationship between a work of art and truth is established, which can only be done by analysing the relationship between form and content. '[4]

As we have seen in the study of isolation in Bernhard's plays, through the structure of language and dramatics, the meaning (content) is both transmitted and destroyed by the structure (form), so that the structure becomes the primary concern and the content only secondary. With this carefully engineered loss of meaning the plays become purely aesthetic, to be admired for their own sake as pieces of art, and not as messages of nihilism. Bernhard may well be a "poseur," a nihilist he certainly is not.

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[3] Dierick, p.74.
[4] ibid.

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